

Let This Grieving Soul Retire!



Woe Is the Weaking Who Leads the Strongest Party

Story
Tsukikage

Art
Chyko



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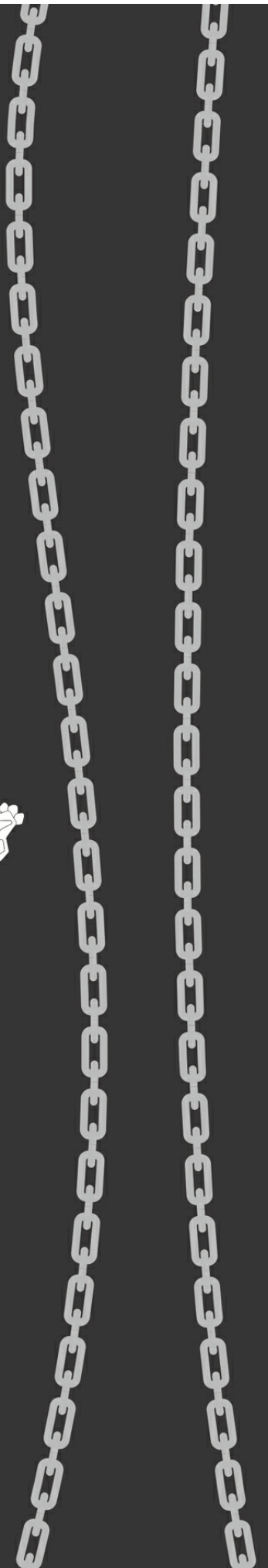
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Part 1:
Stifled Shadow



Prologue: A Dream and Its Fruition

It all began with one unforgettable declaration.

Let's become treasure hunters.

To kids no more than ten years of age, those words marked a change that would shape our lives forever. A friend of mine—one of my childhood friends—had been the one to speak them.

“Let's become treasure hunters. Let's seize fame and fortune from the treasure vaults around the world with only one goal in mind: to become the strongest heroes in the world. If the six of us work together, we can make that goal a reality.”

This friend had always been reckless, but he was also strong and brave. There was no real evidence to support his confidence in us, but his vision of our future seemed to shine before us like gold. Another friend, the most dexterous and fastest among us, was the first to second the idea. The bookworm of the group timidly followed suit, and our quiet but reliable friend gave a big nod in agreement. My little sister, who always tagged along behind me, waited for my response. I was in.

Treasure hunters, those who ventured into ruins throughout the world to loot their Relics, had always held the most coveted of professions. No other career offered a quicker path to everything that mattered in the world: power, fame, and wealth.

Of course, treasure hunting also came with its risks. There was an abundance of stories of hunters who had fallen to sinister traps, terrifying monsters, or peculiar phantoms. Even the tale of one particular hunter, which had served as inspiration for my friend's declaration, included plenty of gruesome details. But those risks were mere dewdrops to the roaring flame that was our yearning for adventure—an adventure that began from the very day we affirmed our dream aloud.

The first step of our journey to becoming hunters was training. We each took on a specific role and began honing our skills. Our strong, brave, and reckless friend became an unparalleled Swordsman; the fastest and most dexterous among us became a Thief—one who didn't necessarily steal things but deactivated traps and guided their party through dungeons. Call it a blessing or a curse, each of my other friends also possessed extraordinary talent for a particular aspect of treasure hunting.

As we began that training, it didn't take long for those talents to show themselves in all of them...but not in me. I was the only one of the six of us—my four friends, my sister, and me—who remained below average in every regard. The only one who failed at everything. The only one who saw no path to becoming a hero.

Five years had passed since then.

It was a miserable morning. Thick black clouds shrouded the sky, and the constant drone of raindrops hitting the earth thrummed in my ears. The smell of water and dirt hung in the air, the ground muddied by three days of sucky weather. Dim gray daylight illuminated the streets.

A long line had formed before a sturdy stone building, composed of men and women of all ages. Some of them gazed ahead with soulless eyes; some were shouting about something; and a few possessed the features of nonhuman species. The only thing everyone in line had in common was that they looked ready to kill. They were dressed in weathered armor made of some sort of leather, or thick coats that covered them from head to toe. One or two even sported full sets of steel-plated armor. Many among them carried swords or firearms.

This one corner of the otherwise desolate street (deserted because of the rain) was awash with a freakish fervor. Everyone in that line had come seeking the faintest flicker of a chance: a chance to prove their strength to well-known treasure hunters and be accepted into their parties.

Over the course of history, treasure hunters had always held the most coveted of professions. They traveled to ruins all over the world—treasure

vaults that depicted lost civilizations—to obtain the Relics within them. The job was perilous, but with enough talent, hunters could score power, fame, and wealth—the kinds of splendor only nobility or renowned merchants could hope to obtain.

Most hunters worked in parties of several members. Working in a party of veteran hunters was far less risky than hunting alone. By the same token, active hunters were always on the lookout for capable additions to their parties. The event hosted here today was intended for that very purpose.

All this rain had stoked my hopes for a lower turnout, but alas, there they all were. I sighed and fell to the back of the line. Without an awning, or cover of any kind really, those waiting before me were soaked to the bone. I pulled my hood down as far as it would go and shrunk into my coat while I waited. There was something isolating about standing alone in such a long line.

“Aaagh! Why the hell’s it so crowded?! Let me in already!” The frustrated shout from close to the head of the line made me shrink further into my coat.

The line was moving slow enough, but the scummy weather was making things worse. I got why he was frustrated, but we were all in the same boat. Most hunters, hunters like him, had a knack for fighting and a very short fuse. The last thing I wanted was to have a brawl break out around me.

One facet of a hunter’s talent was their stature. While my height was close to that of the average man, most men in line were at least a head taller than I was. They were freaks with enough strength and courage to take on monsters far deadlier than humans were ever meant to face. All I could do was pray that the situation would resolve itself before things got ugly. Fortunately, my prayers were heard for once, because no further commotion could be heard from the head of the line.

The line progressed ever so slightly. As I remained hunched under my hood, careful not to make eye contact with anybody, the person one place ahead of me turned around, her beautiful blue gaze fixing on me.

“Hey. You looking to join a party too?” she asked in a tone too cheerful for the dreary weather.

“Uh... Yeah.” Ignoring the question might have caused me more trouble, but I

kept my eyes off hers, just in case.

The girl, clearly a hunter in her late teens, had well-kept light-brown hair and big blue eyes. She wore a long coat with a thick belt that had a sizable pack attached to it. Her attire was what you might expect to see worn by many a hunter, but her unblemished hair and friendly expression were uncharacteristic of those familiar with danger-filled treasure vaults. Not only that, but her clothes were almost spotless.

Female hunters weren't uncommon with how well hunters were treated in society, but in my experience, hunters that looked like this one were one of two types: those who were new to the game, still full of hopes and dreams, or those with extraordinary talent for heredom, who shone brighter after every adventure—bona fide freaks like my old friends. I was about ninety percent sure the girl before me was the former, but I couldn't afford to let my guard down. This industry was chock full of freaks in human clothing.

With a chuckle, the girl met my mistrustful gaze before returning to her cheerful expression and offering me her hand. At least she wasn't the type to throw a punch for an introduction, instead of a handshake. I secretly assigned her a threat level E. E was a rating I assigned to hunters who looked safe to interact with, at least on the surface.

"The name's Rhuda Runebeck, Level 3. Newly Level 3, but that's beside the point."

Level 3? That meant she was middle of the pack and much more skilled than she looked. I silently upped her to a threat level D. At the very least, she was no rookie.

The Explorers' Association (or the Association for short), the overseers of the treasure-hunting world, ranked hunters by levels that were widely regarded as an indication of a hunter's prowess. As a result, hunters commonly included their level in their introductions. Statistically, seventy percent of hunters never progressed past Level 3. Rhuda clearly had potential to have reached that level at her age. Keeping my guard up couldn't hurt; mid-grade hunters were still inhumanly dangerous compared to the average citizen.

I opened my mouth to speak. Since I'd run here without drinking a drop of

water, my voice came out hoarse. "I'm...Krai Andrey. Nice to meet you, Rhuda." I refused to shake the hand she'd extended.

In my five years working as a hunter in the capital, the most valuable thing I'd earned was a sense of danger. If I took that hand, Rhuda could toss me to the ground, crush my hand, or straight up kill me the moment I shook it. Of course, the same possibility also applied to me not returning her handshake.

Rhuda frowned for a moment before switching back to her smile. "Are you a solo hunter too? Everyone's so on edge here. It kinda sucks."

I didn't answer.

"I've always gone it alone, but I feel like I've hit a wall recently. Then I happened to hear about this big call for hunters." She rested her hand on the dagger sheathed on her belt.

Treasure vaults were filled with various traps and hidden pathways. Since the only weapon she carried was a suboptimal choice for combat, she had to be more skilled at disarming gimmicks than fighting monsters. In any case, a solo hunter was no joke. I quietly bumped Rhuda up to a threat level C.

Navigating a treasure vault required several skills, and acquiring all of those alone was no easy feat. Not that going solo didn't have its own merits, but diving alone into a veritable minefield seemed, in my opinion, nothing short of crazy.

The hunter population had more than its fair share of lunatics, but solo hunters had, according to my experience, an even higher ratio of crazy. Even the Association recommended forming a party before setting out to explore a vault. This meant that Rhuda, despite her approachable disposition, had either a major personality flaw that made her incompatible to hunting in parties, or some other reason that was more trouble than it was worth. Both were a hard pass from me.

Unsure of what to say, I tightened my jaw into a smile: another one of the very few skills I'd acquired over the past few years. When in doubt, just smile and nod.

"Alone? Isn't that a death wish?"

“Sure is! That’s my point! I gave the White Wolf’s Den a go, but it was a little more than I could handle.” There was a gleam in Rhuda’s eye, as though she’d been starved of someone to talk to. “So I thought I’d come join a party. I figure that place is doable with five or so Level 3s.”

“Ha! The White Wolf’s Den? Do you have any idea where you’re at?” The derisive tone of the interruption caused Rhuda’s expression to harden. It had come from a mountainous man ahead of us in line.

The man wore a set of metal-plated leather armor under a bloodstained coat. In stark contrast with Rhuda, he exuded the air of a seasoned warrior, right down to the battle-worn hilt of his sword.

I grimaced. The vast majority of hunters were always jonesing for a fight, and the shortness of a hunter’s fuse correlated with their strength in combat. Association members often joked that bloodlust was part of a true hunter’s makeup.

Lo and behold, Rhuda yelled right back at the man two heads taller than her. “Was I talking to you? What’s your problem?!”

“Heh, Level 3? The White Wolf’s Den? This isn’t a hangout for rookies!” The large man’s cheeks twitched into a sneer. The rest of the people in line turned their attention to him and Rhuda, some in annoyance, others out of curiosity, but not one of them moved to stop them.



I sneakily took a step back. Avoiding fights whenever possible was another important lesson I had learned since becoming a hunter.

Due to their advantage in strength, hunters were prohibited from harming civilians. If they were to be caught in the act by the knights that keep the peace, they would face criminal charges and a blow to their pride. Even the most quick-tempered of hunters made sure to keep to this code.

On the other hand, fights between hunters were overlooked for the most part. So, despite me being as weak as any civilian, no one would rescue me if I found myself caught up in a hunters' brawl. Worse, they would blame me for not fighting back, and call me pathetic. What had the world come to?

"Everyone here's ready to kick ass and take names! I mean, come on —*the Steps* are recruiting! That lot might be new on the block, but they're gonna be serious stuff in no time. When a dirt-brained rookie like you wanders in, it's gonna make the whole lot of us look bad!"

Clans were composed of several parties—groups of hunters who (usually) stuck together. There were various benefits to forming a clan: sharing information and exchanging items, to name a few, not to mention lending out party members in times of need. Some parties within the same clan would team up to take on particularly dangerous treasure vaults. Those connections were vital to making anyone's hunting career as smooth as possible. That was why the Association also recommended parties join or form a clan.

Today's recruitment drive, too, was hosted by a clan: the Steps, or more officially "First Steps," one of the most renowned clans in the capital city of Zebrudia and benefactor of many up-and-coming parties. Despite their lack of history in the business, their influence was growing by the day. As far as I could tell, every hunter based in the capital knew their name.

Ordinarily, parties recruited members on an as-needed basis; however, the Steps hosted a grand recruitment event for all of its parties once a year. Anyone who attended, regardless of their birth, age, or level, was eligible to try out for parties at the event. On the condition that a hunter made a good impression on one, they could be welcomed as the next member of that party.

Naturally, parties that belonged to the Steps were of pretty high caliber. Few

passed the clan's rigorous scrutiny, but I could see how, to a talented hunter with no connections, the event could look like the chance of a lifetime.

Ultimately, though, they would be mistaken; the Steps hired only the crème de la crème of the capital. Just like my friends, the gifts of these clan members went far beyond the realm of mere talent. Most applicants ended up having their inflated self-worth popped to smithereens.

"Excuse me?!" Rhuda snarled. "The ad said levels and experience have nothing to do with it. Besides, I'm Level 3, bozo!"

"Oh? Did someone tell you you'd be playing with the big boys when you got to Level 3? Well, that level there's run-of-the-mill in the Steps!" the big man fired back.

He was correct, in a sense. Level 3 *was* only middle of the road. Most well-known parties wouldn't put much stock in the number. On the other hand, Level 3 was only Rhuda's current status. Seventy percent of hunters ended their careers at that level, but any hunter with the right ability could climb the ladder higher. If she had made it to Level 3 all by herself, gaining experience in a party would soon take her to new heights. Applicants like Rhuda were precisely why the event advertised no level requirement. No matter how talented a hunter you were, you always started at Level 1.

I thought the guy's excuse was pretty weak to justify him picking on Rhuda, but I kept my mouth shut. This wasn't the time to be saying anything unnecessary. Even as I silently watched, Rhuda and the guy continued egging each other on as if I weren't even there. That was a good sign.

The monstrous man, spitting insults at Rhuda, placed his hand on the sword at his waist—a longsword about a meter long. Unlike Rhuda's self-defense dagger, his weapon had been crafted to take on monsters and phantoms in treasure vaults.

Truth be told, I wouldn't have put my money on Rhuda. The big guy was by no means less than Level 3. Even so, she showed no sign of backing down.

"You sayin' you wanna go? All right, bring it on," she said, completely undaunted. Her well-shaped lips twisted into a wild grin. Mirroring the behemoth before her, she brushed her dagger with her hand. Then suddenly,

she drew it in one spectacular motion.

Treasure hunters weren't really human anyway. If a hunter got into a fight with a civilian, the hunter would be blamed no matter the circumstances, but when it came to hunter-on-hunter violence, the one who drew their weapon first would come under fire. This was no doubt the reason the guy, who was just as riled up as Rhuda, hadn't drawn his sword before she did; the man was no stranger to a scrap. Now, even if she ended up beaten to a pulp, Rhuda would earn no sympathy. The law spared no mind to disparity in levels when it came to spats like this.

And here I was, minding my own business. How did I get myself into this mess?

As I silently cursed the wind, rain, and the commotion unfolding ahead of me, a man in white uniform stepped out of the stone building at the front of the line. The uniform resembled that of an imperial officer, with the exception of a silver embroidered pair of footsteps on his collar: the insignia of First Steps.

The man looked just as intimidating as the goliath facing off against Rhuda. Accentuated by the scars on his face, he shot killer glares at both parties before shouting as loud as they were. "Cut it out, both of you! If you're gonna fight, take it somewhere else! If not, I'll give you the boot before you even step through that door!"

Rhuda's opponent clicked his tongue and returned his half-drawn sword to its sheath. Rhuda followed suit with her dagger, the corner of her mouth twitching. Then the line resumed its crawl.

The atmosphere inside the building was so heated with excitement, you could almost feel it. A whiff of alcohol lingered in the air of what appeared to be a bar. All of its tables and chairs had been pushed aside, leaving an open space for starry-eyed hunters to line up.

Rhuda, who had been let in at the same time as me, was gawking with a wide-eyed stare. Apparently, the fight outside was already gone and forgotten. "Wow, they're all hunters?" she exclaimed.

Several tables were positioned along the walls, with a few white-uniformed

members of First Steps manning each station. The parties at said stations came in all shapes and sizes, from those composed of several well-known hunters to others notorious solely for their leaders. Some of the parties recruited on the basis of brute strength, while others were on the lookout for a particular skill set. Any hopefuls were to get in a line ready to try out for the party of their choosing.

Each party had their own method of recruiting. Of course, those included standard methods like interviews or demonstrations of skill, but I had heard that some parties trusted their gut instincts above all else.

I observed the room for a while but noticed the somewhat bewildered-looking Rhuda was still rooted to the spot. I would have ignored her if I didn't feel so bad.

"First time?" I asked.

"It's not yours?"

"This is my fifth, I guess."

"Fifth?! So you've had to... Forget it. I'm sorry," she said, apologizing to me for some reason.

"It's no big deal. I suppose most people here are back for another round."

All that mattered in treasure hunting was skill; those with talent were picked up in no time. But that didn't mean the talentless stood no chance. There had to be others like me in the crowd who'd accepted their incompetence but had shown up here anyway. Hey, perhaps stubbornness was the one talent I did possess.

I knew where to start. I stepped away from the crowds to get a better view. By the looks of things, more parties were recruiting than usual. Not all parties partook annually in the recruitment drive, but this time, I could see every one of the noteworthy parties in attendance. That explained the line.

As if we hadn't only just met that morning, Rhuda stuck tight to my heels. "Hey, Krai, would you mind filling me in a little? I'm not sure where to start."

"Uh, sure. I don't mind a good hunter owing me one."

Rhuda would definitely end up making it past Level 3 in her career—unless she wound up dead somewhere. Her expression softened slightly at my comment.

“I’ve been in the capital for a long while now,” I said, “so I know most of the famous hunters. I think you’ve got a good shot today.”

First of all, a hunter couldn’t just walk up to any random party and expect to get in. Each party operated on a different philosophy and was looking to fill a specific need. While there was some truth to the idea that joining a good party would set you up for life, it wasn’t unheard of for newbies to have trouble fitting in.

Not only that, but disparity in talent among the party could lead to a terrible heartache. I thought Rhuda had potential, but the imperial capital attracted the best hunters from all over. Some of them looked human but were something entirely different beneath the skin—my friends to name a few of them.

“I don’t know what you can or want to do. Judging by your dagger, combat isn’t your thing.” I looked her up and down, taking note of her gear. Beside her dagger was a leather pack small enough to not inhibit her movement, which I assumed was packed with lockpicks and other tools.

Each hunter had their own set of strengths and weaknesses. Typically, solo hunters were recruited as brute-force attackers, having already proved their worth of surviving alone against monsters and phantoms. More often than not, these guys had a knack for combat.

However, solo hunters more proficient in detraping and enemy detection tended to fall short of formerly partied hunters who had dedicated themselves to that craft, unhindered. Rhuda wouldn’t find her place as a Thief in a party unless she had more to show for her efforts. She no doubt knew this as well, so I wasn’t going to reiterate the fact just to get on her bad side.

As she waited for me to say something, I pointed to the end of the room. “Right off the bat, there’s an order to this place: the farther the party is from the entrance, the higher their level.” Just as hunters were given levels by the Explorers’ Association, so were clans and parties. I pointed in particular at the large table at the far end of the room, flocked with the most applicants. “That’s

the strongest party out of the ones recruiting today: Ark Brave. Have you heard of them? They're the best of the best at the average age of twenty-one. They conquered a Level 7 treasure vault with just the six of them."

Ark Brave was filled with exceptional freaks even among the hellishly strong hunters infesting the capital. Each and every member possessed a skill set that defied every explanation but divine bestowment, and their leader was known as a hero.

Just for reference, the White Wolf's Den that Rhuda was hoping to conquer was a Level 3 treasure vault. The Association could employ more art than science when it came to designating levels, but a Level 3 meant they recommended going in with a party of Level 3 hunters. A treasure vault only one level higher was said to be ten times as hard to complete, proving the sheer immeasurable difference between Rhuda's skills and those of Ark Brave.

"If you get into that party, your success is all but guaranteed. If not, just the slightest praise from one of the members would make any of these other groups wanna get their hands on you."

Even a newbie solo hunter had to have heard of Ark Brave. Rhuda seemed a bit intimidated as she whispered, "Just curious, but...do you think I have a shot?"

"That's up to you. But as far as I know, Ark Brave has never taken on a new member through an event like this."

They were one of the biggest names in the capital, the very best or a close second among all young-blooded parties in the city, not to mention that their party's structure was already fully established. I doubted that any applicant lining up at their table expected to actually get in. They were there only to network, or even just to meet the Braves in person. Rhuda watched the crowd and let out a long sigh. As soon as she had heard about the Level 7 treasure vault, she'd seen her limit.

I continued gesturing around the room, naming and explaining each party to her. As I did so, I spotted a few fresh faces to the event; it seemed most of the clan were in attendance. Most of the names I dropped would be familiar to anyone who'd been on the job in the capital for a few months. The information

wasn't that hard to sniff out; Rhuda just happened to be a newbie who went hunting solo. Besides, not even I knew *every* party in the Steps.

Once I'd completed my full rundown of the room, Rhuda looked at me wearily. "You sure know a lot about them, don'tcha, Krai? I'm getting tired just listening."

"It's nothing."

"I don't mean to pry, but where are you looking to end up?"

"Hmm... Nowhere in particular. I'm pretty much useless."

I had no forte. Forget about jacks-of-all-trades; I was the master of none. That was me. I had neither courage nor strength. The faint flicker of passion I'd had back when I still believed in myself had long since been extinguished.

Needless to say, hunting was dangerous work. Seventy percent of hunters met their ends in treasure vaults. A guy like me wasn't made for that kind of risk. I'd used my talent as an excuse and all, but maybe my guts were the real problem. Urgh, I was gonna barf.

"Is that so? Then, if you don't mind, how about forming a party with me?" Rhuda asked, more cheerfully than she had to. I think she meant it. My heart constricted, and I struggled to breathe.

Rhuda was a good egg among the sea of thugs that called themselves hunters. She hadn't offered half-heartedly nor in jest. For me, though, just the thought of weighing her down was painful.

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm beyond pity. You should join a party that's a good match for you for the sake of your career."

"Oh, okay, I guess."

I reached for the silver chain that hung from my belt. The cool sensation steadied my heartbeat a bit.

As if to clear the air, Rhuda changed the subject. "Hey, I wonder why they let that table out." She pointed dramatically at a large uninhabited table behind Ark Brave's.

"You two really ain't got a clue, do you?" The big guy from before came

stomping over with a sardonic grin. His face had reddened, perhaps from the heat, his massive biceps and savage leather armor looking even more menacing in the light. His mood seemed to have improved from before. Maybe he'd had some success.

Rhuda scowled at him. "What do *you* want? They're gonna haul you over the coals."

"Lighten up, kiddo. Your big shot hunting mentor, the Great Greg, is just tryna give you some friendly advice."

The Great Greg? Hadn't heard of him. Of course, I only knew the very top percent of hunters that anyone acquainted with the industry would know. There were plenty of tough guys I didn't know, so maybe the big guy was still making his mark.

"That table's for the party that started up First Steps along with Ark Brave. Looks like they blew us off again."

"The party that founded the clan?" Rhuda blinked.

The Great Greg leaned closer, whispering as if imparting classified information. "The Steps have been running this gig for years now, but the turnout from their end's bigger than usual today. There's the Braves, who just beat a Level 7 vault without losing a member, the Crosses and Starlights, who don't usually recruit... And then there's those guys over by themselves all decked out with the mark of the Steps."

The Great Greg gestured towards the edge of the room with his eyes, indicating a disgruntled-looking hunter leaning with his arms crossed against the wall. The hunter, like others in the room, wasn't wearing the same uniform as the clan members recruiting, but even so, his collar and sleeves were adorned with pins and cuffs depicting silver footsteps. Clan members were mandated to make their insignia visible.

"Why'd ya think those Steps hunters showed up when they're not even recruiting? There's gotta be a reason," he added meaningfully.

The Great Greg had done his research, but I knew a little more than he did. "Those guys are solo hunters within the Steps," I said.

“Solo hunters can join a clan?” Rhuda asked, surprised.

I nodded. “Parties can be as small as you want. Since only parties can join a clan, a solo hunter can sign up as a party to get in. You’d have to be a pretty capable hunter, though.”

That, or they were just like Rhuda, who happened to have a little luck and talent, and had reaped the rewards for their risky choices.

I turned away from the guy leaning on the wall and pointed at a girl who was aimlessly wandering about the empty table. She had short black hair and wore a black leather combat suit and a dagger on her belt, a skintight getup optimized for mobility. She was perhaps a little younger than Rhuda.

“That’s Tino Shade. She’s a Level 4 solo member of the Steps. Pretty famous.”

“That little girl?”

“I wouldn’t say that if I were you. Don’t let her age and appearance fool you into thinking she isn’t as hotheaded as any other bruiser here.”

Tino was a Thief, just like Rhuda—a sign of what Rhuda could become. She, another freak that belonged to First Steps, could sweep through the White Wolf’s Den on her own.

For the first time, the Great Greg turned his attention to me, with an air of interest, in fact. “You don’t look like much of a hunter, but you sure know your stuff.”

“Reconnaissance is key. Besides, she’s actually the apprentice of someone I know.”

I tugged on my hood down further. To be more specific, Tino was the apprentice to a friend of mine. In other words, my friend was even more of a freak than this freak. What a development.

“Someone you know?” Rhuda asked.

“I don’t know why she’s here, though,” I said. Tino worked alone. Perhaps she’d gotten tired of it all and was here to finally join a party. It was pretty normal for parties to recruit from within their own clans. Of course, there were better ways to get internally hired than coming to an event like this.

The Great Greg crossed his arms and laughed haughtily. “That’s the stuff I’m talking about. There’s a rumor goin’ around. One of the original Steps parties that hasn’t recruited in years will be here...” he said, his eyes gleaming with grim excitement. His voice carried with it a certain tone as if he were retelling a ghost story. Finally, the Great Greg said it. “Grieving Souls.”

My whole body shook. It felt as though I were standing alone on the precipice of an endless void.

Oblivious to my condition, the Great Greg cracked a grin. “The Grievors run a tight ship, and a small one at that. You’d never catch a glimpse of them outside of an event like this, let alone get a chance at joining their party. Those guys over there are dying to make themselves known to them,” he said, excitement creeping into his voice. Rhuda looked on with astonishment.

The Grievors. My stomach churned whenever I heard that name. That was the nickname my friends and I had assigned to our party a few years back when we’d moved from the countryside to the capital. The young-blooded party of five freaks rose up the ranks in no time, a party strong enough to rival Ark Brave. The party’s official name, however, was Grieving Souls.

Before I knew it, I was parched. Cold sweat trickled down my back. I felt the urge to beg the Great Greg to not say that name, but that would have been too suspicious. I tugged on my hood, desperate to hide every last part of myself.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling okay?” Rhuda asked with concern as I sunk deeper inside, shivering. I was gonna barf.

“Well, looks like the rumors were garbage. With all the rigmarole, I thought maybe there’d be something to it.” The Great Greg shrugged, unconcerned with the outcome. All parties in the Steps were high level, not just Ark Brave and Grieving Souls. Even the short-tempered Great Greg wasn’t going to complain that one party didn’t show. The same couldn’t be said, however, for the rest of the hunters in the room.

“Hey, what’s going on here?! Where are the Grievors?!”

Numerous eyes shot towards the source of the voice, a boy with scorching red hair and a greatsword on his back, too big for the average human to carry. Despite his short stature, his well-built muscles were evident through his

clothes.

Not to repeat myself, but the shortness of a hunter's fuse correlated with their strength in combat. This kid sure had guts to say what no one (not even the Great Greg) dared to say. I saw in his eyes that he knew he could take on everyone in the room. He'd probably earned that confidence too. The greatsword on his back had a distinctive glow signifying that it hadn't been made by human hands. No doubt it was something he'd acquired from a treasure vault: a Relic, if I'd ever seen one. While he was clearly younger than me, the aura about him kept me from chocking him up as a reckless idiot.

The boy continued shouting, uncaring of anyone's approval. "All you flunkies can get bent! I came all this way to see the guys at the top!"

The Great Greg watched him curiously. "Young blood. Don't tell me he's lookin' to make enemies of everyone here," he muttered. The Great Greg might have looked like a brute, but with his age came some rationality.

Treasure hunters needed allies. News traveled fast of those stirring the pot. No matter how good of a hunter you were, a bad rep would be a real setback. The boy had probably gotten away with it up till this point, but he was now standing in a room full of capable fighters who all felt at least *somewhat* positively about the Steps, many of whom carrying Relics of their own.

For the time being, the room allowed the boy to continue his tantrum, perhaps because he spoke for a certain fraction of the hunters here. Those who didn't share his sentiment watched with pitying amusement. The boy was now going from table to table, glaring at the party members with looks that could kill. Ultimately, though, almost no one was taking him seriously. No one handled rabid miscreants better than seasoned hunters.

Close to spitting fire, the boy raged like a beast trying to intimidate its pack. "I'm gonna be the strongest hunter in the world someday! I'm already at Level 4. I was going to give this 'strongest party in the capital' a chance to join me, but not anymore!"

He could talk the talk, all right. This kid was going places—or dying young, one or the other. By the looks of him, he had to still be in his teens, which made reaching Level 4 quite the achievement. His sky-high cockiness and brazen

arrogance weren't so admirable of traits, but that didn't matter one bit if he could keep winning fights. After all, that was what being a hunter was all about.

Rhuda's cheeks were twitching, showing her apparent devastation that this moron was at a higher level. That wasn't all bad news though—there was still the possibility that he'd leveled up through working with a party.

As the boy stomped about, a member of the clan finally stepped up. It wasn't any of the members who were recruiting, but Tino Shade who, until now, had been standing alone in a corner of the room. She casually strolled up next to the boy, shooting him a look that would send shivers down anyone's spine.

"Huh? What do you want?!"

"All bark. No bite. We don't want you."

Uh-oh. Her icy tone told me she was totally pissed. I could hardly blame her when Grieving Souls was her mentor's party. The other Steps members, who had brushed off the boy's attitude before, now came rushing in.

"Yo, Tino, we're here to recruit, remember? Let's not cause a scene or you'll ruin this for the rest of us!"

"I'll take him out in no time. That's what Lizzy would do. I'm the one who'll join the Grieving Souls. She promised I could once I'm strong enough."

Tino was within arm's reach of the boy with the mighty greatsword. Her temper was just as short as the boy's.

As she got ready to pounce, more clan members flocked to talk her down. It was getting hard to tell which of the pair was causing more trouble. "Ignore that idiot. He's a waste of time. We have orders to keep things civil, remember?! You're gonna get us all in trouble!"

"Huh?! Who're you calling an idiot?! I'll kill you!"

"You, you idiot! Drop dead, already. We're trying to work!"

Now even these clan members were responding in kind. High-level clan or not, hunters were all the same. These freaks drooled for any chance to show their power.

Like adding fuel to the fire, the commotion grew rapidly. Thankfully, there

was no furniture close at hand, but I expected them to draw their weapons any second. Once they did, there would be no stopping the scrap until one of them died or felt better. A treasure hunter brawl was nothing short of a calamity.

At least everyone in the building now was a hunter, so I wouldn't have to worry about civilian casualties—that is, until Relics came into play. Those could easily blow the roof off of a building or two.

“Yeah, show him what for!” the Great Greg jeered, triggering many around him to join in. Some of them, much to my dismay, were members of First Steps. De-escalation was off the table.

I tugged Rhuda's sleeve as she stood there dumbfounded, before whispering to her, “Rhuda, let's give up for today and get out of here. Once this lot starts, there's no stopping them. You'll die if you get caught in the mix.”

Hunters weren't ones for turning the other cheek. Once attacked, they hit back harder. It was a terrible cycle that could be triggered with so much as one stray arrow, meaning the brawl wouldn't die out until only one last man was standing.

Tino shrugged, tapping the toe of her boot on the ground. I recognized that tick—she was about to kick the boy's head off. A well-trained hunter could kick a crater into the ground or blast through a wall. Phantoms impervious to heavy artillery would be taken down by a single kick.

“What? Wait!”

“Look, the only thing I've got going for me is my sense of danger. We've gotta leave before the fight breaks out.”

“But I came here to join a party!”

That ship had sailed. Everyone here was a meathead. You couldn't join a party if you were dead. I'd survived the past five years thinking like this. Rhuda had no idea how high-level hunters fought.

I knew I shouldn't have come here... As a wave of regret washed over me, I almost let out a sob. “Fine! I'll help you find a party, but next time, okay?! Now's the time to be staying alive!”

“Okay, okay. I get it.”

The already hot air in the building was ready to boil us alive. Hotter still was the greatsword the boy had drawn, which was quite literally on fire. Relics like this one all had their own unique abilities. The crimson flame roared along the blade without dying out or spreading, illuminating Tino’s steely expression.

Avoiding all eyes, Rhuda and I began crawling towards the exit. I felt pitiful at that moment, but, more importantly, safe. I couldn’t say the same for all those taking part in the disturbing exchange behind me.

“Kill first, think later. Lizzy taught me that.”

“You asked for it, girly. Bring it on, but don’t think I’ll go easy on you!”

“Who do you think you’re messing with, huh?! Let’s take this outside, now!”

If they were to fight in public, the knights on patrol would find out in no time. The people out there were sensitive enough to hunter scandals as it was. If a civilian were caught in the cross fire, this pair would be neck-deep in trouble.

More voices egged them on, which I dreaded to think belonged to the Steps. The whole place was in total chaos.

“Have at him! Fight! Fight! Fight!”

“Don’t encourage them—”

A scream. Crude whistling and jeers. The utter turmoil. As we sneaked away towards the exit, someone finally cued Tino and the boy in to a brawl. I shuffled my knees as fast as they could, crawling away through the pain.

Just before I reached the exit, just when I thought I’d make it out of the danger zone alive, a blast of wind swept through the room. The hot air instantly dissipated, and I was thrown back onto my rear end by the gust. My hood slid off. Rhuda, who was following behind me, let out a short yelp.

A shadow was looming over me. My heart was pounding in my ears. Terrified, I lifted my head.

“When did you...?” Rhuda muttered in astonishment.

Eyes as clear as black diamonds stared silently down at me. They belonged to

Tino, who should have been facing off against the loudmouthed boy. Her neatly trimmed hair swished as she came to a stop with her smooth, bare legs poised before me. Her expression was no longer icy, but puzzled.

“Um, can I help you?” Rhuda timidly asked.

Tino didn’t answer but spoke with an equally shaky voice. “What are you doing, master? How long have you been here?”

Ugh, I was gonna barf.

Let’s think back to when our dream began.

Having come of age at fifteen, the six of us teamed up as planned and tested our mettle by tackling a Level 1 treasure vault. Treasure vaults came in all shapes and sizes, ranked based on the location, difficulty of their traps, dangers, and available Relics. Level 1 vaults were the easiest of the bunch, a favorite among rookie hunters. They proved no match for us, hunters of endless dedication and years of rigorous training.

We had shot through our first treasure vault faster than any rookie party in history. But while our future as treasure hunters was becoming more concrete, I couldn’t deny my skills were lagging behind those of my friends. Truth be told, I’d always had an inkling throughout our training, but the realization came as a slap to the face when I was confronted with a real-life treasure vault. In fact, I felt as though I’d tripped and were falling into an endless pit.

Although the difference in our capabilities was no big deal at the time, I knew that in a few years I wouldn’t be able to keep up with their hunts. Amid my genius friends, I alone had as much talent as the average treasure hunter—and even that was giving myself too much credit. I was the poster child of dead weight.

At the same time, I also realized how far we were from equal. I might have been the same age and grown up in the same environment as my friends, but I was a drop of rain in a torrent of storms. Every one of my friends had a lot more mana than I had, was much stronger than I was, or possessed some other great talent. Even my sister had a knack for magic, when I had no knack at all. That we weren’t siblings by blood didn’t really matter; that disparity hurt the most.

The six of us had been friends for as long as I could remember. Even before hunting became our dream, we had always stuck together. We had our fair share of disagreements and fights, but we got along as well as any other friends. The town we'd grown up in was small enough that we felt pretty much like family.

Seeing as I, the weakest of the bunch, could see the stark difference in our skill and growth, no doubt everyone else saw it as well. The fact that they hadn't mentioned it all those years was a testament to their kindness.

The night after we'd completed our first vault, we stayed at an inn for the first time, and I didn't get a wink of sleep. Tears staining my pillow, I grappled all night long with the decision until I made up my mind: I would give it all up.

Treasure vaults were wrought with wealth and danger. Just as mana material—the building blocks of treasure vaults—generated Relics, they created living phantoms as adversaries to hunters who dared enter. I feared that, if I had stayed in the party, I would one day put all my friends in danger. If they would just leave me behind in the face of the inevitable, I wouldn't have had a problem (other than with me dying, of course), but I knew they would never do that. Besides, I didn't want to die.

Giving up on my lifelong dream was a bummer, but it sure beat endangering my friends. That said, my adventure would end with clearing a treasure vault for rookies, which would be a funny story in and of itself. I could look forward to my friends becoming hotshot hunters so that I could brag about once belonging to their party.

The next day, I gathered my friends together in the inn and explained to them why I was giving up on my dream. I'm pretty sure my eyes were tear-free after I'd cried them all out during the night.

Luke Sykol, the friend who'd inspired our journey all those years ago—who would later become an apprentice to the Sword Saint and be widely known for his versatile swordsmanship—spoke with just as much gravitas as I had. “You weren't the only one thinking last night. Krai, since you don't really have a role, you should be our leader.”

“Did you hear a word I just said?”

That had been the beginning and the end of me. My friends' talents bloomed far more quickly and explosively than I had even anticipated, allowing them to conquer vault after vault of rapidly ascending levels. After just a year, I could no longer keep up with them, but I remained their leader for one simple reason—simply put, these guys were idiots. Even so, they were the most powerful idiots in the world.

My passion for hunting was soon seized by an all-consuming fear of death—a fear that I couldn't overcome. I wanted to quit hunting then and there, not out of humility but out of pure dread. Nonetheless, I remained their leader.

And now, several years later, I was still the leader of this ever-rising, ever-growing band of freaks.

"This guy's a Griever? I don't see it. He's too busy mopping the floor with his own ass."

"Where was he when we had ourselves a fight?"

"Huh, he was behind me in the line outside."

People were talking about me. I had it coming; if I were in their shoes, I would have done the same thing.

Sprawled out on the table assigned to Grieving Souls, I let my gaze wander. The other members in the party rarely showed up to these events, so I had the table all to myself. Currently, they were out of town, taking on a treasure vault beyond the capital. Honestly, though, even if they had been here, I would never have brought them to this.

All eyes in the room were on me, but no one dared approach. *What did I do to deserve this?* I thought. *I just overslept a little. I'd done my part, so I was trying to get out of here! What was the point of me being here at all?!*

"So this is solitude," I said with a sardonic smile.

My stomach was in knots. No doubt about it, I was by far the most fragile hunter in the room. I hadn't been trying to get away from the fight as a gag or out of pure laziness. I'd been genuinely terrified. I wondered how all these

people eyeing me would react if they discovered I wasn't just a member of the Grievors, but their leader.

Tino, the one who'd dragged me to the table, puffed out her cheeks while shooting daggers at any gossipers. "Don't worry, master. I know how amazing you are."

"Because of you, I'm suffering a great deal of psychological anguish."

Tino Shade was apprenticed to one of my childhood friends, Liz Smart, the Stifled Shadow—a genocidal freak who killed first and asked questions later. We'd met Tino back when we had first arrived in the capital, and she'd been under Liz's wing ever since. Even when I, Ark Brave, and a few other parties had founded First Steps, Tino hadn't been far behind.

Tino loved Liz like a sister, calling her "Lizzy" for short, and even looked up to me as a leader. By now, she was practically the mascot of Grieving Souls, even though she grew as quickly as the rest of the Griever freaks.

Incidentally, her justification for calling me "master" was that I was the leader of Grieving Souls and clan master of First Steps. In other words, I was the ringleader of the freak show. When we first set up the clan, I had nodded along to this and that, and found myself stuck with the role. Just thinking back on it made me wanna barf.

"Why are you here? Don't you have a hunt to go on?" I asked.

Tino clutched one of her elbows and shrank down with a puppylike gaze. Her entreating demeanor and short temper were byproducts courtesy of her mentor's teachings.

"But I, um... I heard that Grieving Souls was looking for new members today."

"I didn't say that. I just said I'd stop by."

Even then, that was only because the vice clan master had scolded me for never showing up to the event of my own conception. I had observed the goings-on every time, but that was always when disguised as an applicant.

That aside, it wasn't right to put stock in a hazy rumor like that. I'd never understand hunters. But if that was all it took for more applicants to show up,

I'd make sure to spread rumors next time. Grieving Souls aside, there were plenty of parties looking for promising new members. Not that I'd show up next time, or ever again after today. Couldn't everyone just behave themselves?

As I chatted with Tino, taking full advantage of the room being stunned by my dramatic entrance, a frustratingly good-looking guy approached me from the next table over. The crowd that had formed a respectful distance away from us parted to clear a path.

This man, with his silky blond locks and friendly blue eyes, looked better than anyone else in the Steps' white uniform, which paid homage to that of the imperial army. Born and raised in the empire, he was now one of the strongest hunters in it —one of only five Level 7 hunters in the vicinity. He was the paragon of our kind, a hero, and the leader of Ark Brave. Yes, the man standing before us was none other than Ark Rodin, the Argent Thunderstorm. What a douche.

This guy just so happened to be the rival of my childhood friends. He hung around in a party composed of himself and a bunch of cute girls. What made him really get on my nerves was that not only was he unbelievably strong, he was actually a humble and genuinely nice guy. Just thinking about how shallow I was to find him so insufferable only served to grind my gears even further. It was a truly terrible cycle.

"Yo, Krai, what took you so long?"

"Nothing. I overslept."

Ark let out a hearty laugh. "Ha! Your jokes always crack me up."

That wasn't a joke.

"Stay away from master, philanderer," Tino snapped.

Ark laughed even harder, slapping the table with his palm. What a scary guy.



We may have been among friends and all, but Tino needed to stop biting people's heads off. We should have trained her better.

I turned to the friendly chick magnet and answered him with a little bravado. "I was too excited, so I couldn't get to sleep."

I wasn't lying about the sleep, at least. I'd been so anxious last night, I hadn't caught a wink until dawn. If I weren't also so afraid of the vice clan master, I never would have shown myself in front of so many short-fused freaks in the first place. As it was, though, strength was the only status that mattered in the world of hunters, putting me squarely on the bottom of the totem pole.

"I see. You disguised yourself as an applicant so you could take a better look from the shadows. But that's not really fair, is it? The rules say we've gotta wear our uniforms, but you're not —not even our insignia."

"I overslept. Open your earholes." I hadn't had time to get ready.

Ark squinted, looking me up and down. As gorgeous and genius as he was, he was still a hunter. That meant, from time to time, he didn't listen to others. In fact, hunters usually didn't listen at all.

I wasn't taking a better look at anybody. I had no hand in the recruitment of other parties, and our party wasn't looking for anyone new. My appearance today was just supposed to be for show.

"Master, he's too rude. Let's kick him out of the clan."

Ark guffawed. "You're so funny, Tino. I love it!"

"If only everyone were as forgiving as you, Ark," I said.

If the Great Greg or the boy who'd picked a fight with Tino had been in Ark's shoes, at least three brawls would have broken out already.

Ark was currently trying to pet Tino's head as she all but growled at him and dodged his hand. He had some nerve trying to tame that little freak. He could pet all he wanted, but this one would bite.

I rarely went out in public for fear of being spotted (I wore a disguise when I did), so Ark had to be the most recognizable hunter from our clan here. A number of hunters in the room, some in our clan and some not, were watching

us closely without approaching, possibly because they didn't want to interrupt Ark. It would be pretty great if he stuck around with me until the event was completely over.

"Did you find any gems?" I asked, which drew even more eyes to Ark.

Ark Brave was still in the process of evaluating prospective hunters; if Ark named a single one of the hopefuls, they'd be in their party in a heartbeat. Even if Ark didn't go that far, his word alone would get them into anywhere they wanted.

Ark furrowed his brow for some time before shaking his head. "Not yet, to be honest. I've seen a few with potential, but if you were to ask me if they could carry their own weight in the kind of treasure vaults we'd be taking on..."

I should have known.

Freaks were wrought among kindred flames. With hunters' strength correlating to past experience in vaults, finding a new member that could jump straight into Ark Brave off the bat was no easy feat. If there were such a hunter, they would have made a name for themselves already.

This recruiting event was better designed for finding diamonds in the rough. I felt bad for the applicants being toyed with by the parties' impossibly high standards.

A light flickered in Ark's eyes as he calmly asked, "How about you, Krai?"

How am I supposed to know? I'm not even looking.

I took a look around the room. Every hunter whose eyes I met contorted their face into an awkward smile. My gaze met Rhuda's as she stood awkwardly by a wall. Beside her, the Great Greg looked at me with wide eyes. The feisty redheaded boy, who was being held back by a pair of Steps hunters, bared his teeth at me. I glanced at Tino, and her shoulders twitched. It was the kind of attention that made me wanna barf.

"We're all set right now, but if someone caught my eye, would you take them?" I said in jest.

Ark closed his eyes and pondered for a moment. "All right. I'll take your word

for it, Krai.”

The entire room burst into hurried whispers. No sane hunter would let an outsider decide who to take into their party, let alone into the most promising pack of youngsters in the capital.

“What the hell, Ark?!” a female Magus from his party blurted out.

I sat up straight, crossing my arms and legs in an overly exaggerated manner. “Oh, yeah? Anything goes?” I asked with a smirk.

Ark swallowed. “Just one, if you will. We can’t afford to train too many rookies at once.” His generosity knew no bounds.

Just one, huh? That’s an interesting thought. Good going, Ark.

It could work out. It would certainly stir up some buzz, and if word spread, the next recruitment drive would be an even bigger hit. I’d have to rent a larger room. The only problem was that I myself had no eye for scouting talent.

So far, I had only come across a piece of trash that had a little potential, a funny piece of trash with decent experience, and a fairly strong but reckless piece of trash. They were a far cry from the kind of talent I would recommend to Ark Brave, and I had no clue as to their hidden potential. Ark had given me a free pass, but if I didn’t take this seriously, tension would linger between us. The easy way out was to recommend a solo hunter from within the clan, since the status guaranteed a high floor of talent.

My eyes met Tino’s. She blushed. “I’m flattered, master. It really is an honor, but my heart belongs to your party. I can’t join the party of that poser. Please recommend your second choice.”

“I really ought to check up on what nonsense Liz has been feeding you,” I muttered.

My friends were long-standing rivals to Ark Brave. Unlike the Braves, though, Grievors were petty. Ark was definitely no fake, by the way. He was handsome to his very core.

I scanned the room for a while, checking out the potentials to no avail. It’d be a shame to retract the cool line I’d pulled off, but I considered telling Ark I’d had

no luck after all. That said, seeing the freaks in the room look to me with bated breath, I couldn't help but want to keep the charade going. I might have lost my drive as a treasure hunter, but that didn't mean I couldn't play the badass clan leader.

I pinched my brows together, putting on my best contemplative expression. "Let me see, then. I do have one in mind to pick up as a Griever when the time is right."

"Hey!" yelled a hostile voice from across the room. The hot-blooded kid from earlier had escaped the hold of the hunters and was standing dramatically pointing his finger at me. He was a Level 4 hunter, after all. He'd be quite the match for most here. "Get on your knees and beg me, you schmucks!" he yelled through labored breaths. "Then maybe I'll consider that lousy party of yours!"

This kid sure wasn't shy.

"Don't you already have a party?" I asked.

"What's it to you?!"

Well, kid, it has to do with recruiting you.

I put a hand on my chin and examined the boy. He seemed talented, all right, and he had the guts. Manners could be taught if Ark were there to crack the whip. Having a strong arm in a specific field meant that he had potential. He'd get himself killed in a clash against the other Grievers, but I couldn't care less how much headache he'd cause Ark.

I clapped my hands loudly and smiled at the boy. "What's your name, kid?"

"It's Gilbert Bush! Gilbert of the Purgatorial Sword!" he shouted, just barely keeping his emotions in check.

The Purgatorial Sword must have been the greatsword Relic on his back, since only a handful of hunters in the capital had earned a proper title.

Ark sized up Gilbert carefully. I doubted even his keen eye saw anything other than a twerp.

I clapped my hands again, ready to speak. "Very well, Gilbert. You have my recommendation, under one condition."

“What condition?!”

I had no eye for talent. Rhuda looked like a piece of trash with a little potential, the Great Greg like a funny piece of trash, and Gilbert, a reckless piece of trash. But who knew if they really *were* trash? Since I was no expert, it would come down to pure chance, so it didn’t really matter who I picked.

“You heard me. My condition is...don’t lose. Winning’s the most important quality of a hunter. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Gilbert—no, the whole clan in fact—was hanging on my every word, all of which was complete bogus. Ugh, my stomach was acting up again.

“If you’re not strong enough to win, you’ll put your party in jeopardy, so show me that you won’t lose. Oh, and just so you know, since becoming a hunter, I’ve never lost a single fight.”

“What?!”

Of course I’d never lost a fight—I’d never even fought to begin with. I’d used every tactic at my disposal to flee from any and all conflict, from calling upon the perks of my position to using my friends as shields. Today’s challenge would be no exception.

I plucked a gold ring off my left pinkie and tossed it to Gilbert. It was a Shooting Ring—a common piece, but a Relic nonetheless. Though it was hardly the most powerful of Relics, it still fetched a hefty price.

With a beaming smile, I declared, “Attention, all hunters. As it stands, I will recommend this kid here to Ark Brave—that is, unless someone takes the ring. If you procure the ring, the recommendation is yours. While it’s not worth much, it is a Relic. Even if you don’t want my recommendation, you can keep the ring.”

Ark whistled, wide-eyed. Tino caught on to the challenge immediately; she closed the distance between her and Gilbert, and kicked him square in the face.

I stood up quietly, a smile on my face, ready to slip away without anyone noticing.

Time to run.

This is a story of heroes—a tale of the golden age of treasure hunters when people strove for power, fame, fortune, and glory. This is the story of friends who shone like stars, of clan members who shared a common goal, and of a grieving soul, both in the midst of it all and who watched it all from the sidelines.

Chapter One: Dealing with Slave Labor

“I can’t do this anymore. I’m not good enough.”

There I was, pleading with my fellow Grieving Souls, my childhood friends.

One year had passed since we’d started hunting—no time at all in the grand scheme of things—but that one year had been filled with trials and tribulations for me.

Treasure vaults, overflowing with mana material, were packed to the brim with phantoms born of the stuff. Dangers like these lurked around every corner, along with vicious monsters on the prowl for power and countless traps ready to swing shut on your life. Not even fellow treasure hunters there could be trusted. I’d heard it all before, having read heaps of tales on the great hunters of the past, so I had thought I knew all there was to know.

That half-baked resolution of mine had been shattered with ease once I became a hunter. I lost count of how many times I had nearly barfed myself blue in the face. This life of day in, day out life-or-death adventures had worn me down to the bone.

“I can’t keep up with you guys anymore. There’s no way you don’t know this by now, but I’m the one holding us back from this gig.”

Every member of a treasure-hunting party had an important role to play. Offensive types, for example Swordsmen and Magi, were tasked with dispatching incoming monsters; those in supporting roles, such as Thieves and Alchemists, disarmed traps and scouted for enemies; and healers, more often than not Paladins and Clerics, treated injuries and defended the party from harm. As someone with none of these skill sets, I was nothing but a burden.

I had tried. I, in the search for something I could actually do, had knocked on the doors of many a mentor. But at the end of the day, when someone without talent puts in the same effort as someone with it, the latter will always take the lead. And all of my friends—Luke and the rest of them—sure put in the work.

They worked their butts off. As long as there were only twenty-four hours in the day, I would never catch up to them.

A conventional party consisted of five or six members. If they would just replace me—take in another hunter or two that matched up to their skills in my place—they would make much better progress.

Luke Sykol nodded sullenly. “I get it, Krai. We’re weak.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry, Krai,” Liz Smart added from her seat beside me. “You wouldn’t have had to worry about us if we were stronger.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

They were strong. Too strong, even. Enough to keep beating vault after vault of increasingly higher levels while lugging around this Krai Andrey dead weight. Taking on vaults with just the five of them would have been much easier for them.

Luke stared off into the distance, my desperate pleading falling on deaf ears. “What are we doing? Heh. If we slow down now, becoming the best will just be a pipe dream. Thanks for the wake-up call, Krai. I’m gonna go train under this ‘Sword Saint’ or whoever and hone my skills from scratch.”

As if merely going on an afternoon stroll, Luke sauntered off to seek mentorship from the Sword Saint renowned throughout the capital. The others, too, piped up with ideas on how to improve their own skills.

It was then that I realized—these guys were hopeless. Every one of them thought getting stronger was the ticket to solving any problem. Somehow, they just couldn’t grasp the fact that no matter how hard they trained, I’d still be mincemeat.

And so, I scrambled to find any way out of these adventures, and came up with the perfect ploy: I’d establish a clan. If I kept following this lot into harm’s way, I would meet my end in no time, or at least have a big chunk taken out of me. Instead, I’d start a clan, roping in other up-and-coming parties to scout out a new Griever or two—anyone who could keep up with those freaks. That was how I ended up founding First Steps, dodging a treasure-hunting bullet or two

with the pretext of managing the clan.

It had been a whole three years since then.

Let's talk mana material.

I was no expert on the matter, but I was aware that the substance coursed through every fiber of our world. Imagine an invisible cloud of fog that pervaded everything. Occasionally, dense concentrations of it could form due to the influence of ley lines and other factors. When it did, it manifested confined alternate dimensions based on information extracted from the history of the world. Those were treasure vaults: the reason treasure hunting had been a career since days of yore.

Treasure vaults came in all shapes and sizes, manifested from any history imaginable, from lost civilizations to rare natural phenomena. The forms of the vaults themselves, while following certain patterns, materialized in near infinite variety, taking the shape of towers, castles, forests, deserts, underground dungeons, or even more peculiar forms, such as ships, waterfalls, or skies.

The reason treasure hunters delve into these vaults was for the treasures within: unique items called Relics that materialized along with them. They could take the form of anything, may that be a canteen that never ran dry, a ring that protected its wearer from a single fatal blow, or a coat that allowed its wearer to fly, to name a few. Many of these items could not be recreated with modern technology—perhaps an expression of humanity's imagination or a product long lost from the memory of human civilizations. Depending on the power, just one of these bona fide treasures could fetch such a high enough price to allow a hunter to live out the rest of their lives in luxury.

Of course, there were risks involved. There were monsters, powerful beings that dwelled in concentrations of mana material, as well as phantoms, apparitions that came to be in the same manner as the vaults themselves. Then there were the countless traps and the challenges of the terrain itself. Even altercations between agitated hunters could lead to instant death.

Despite facing these life-threatening dangers, hunters continued to yearn for the promises treasure vaults held. Fame, fortune, and the power a hunter

obtained by taking in the high-density mana material were all too tempting for them to give up.

And there was no better location for a hunter to set themselves up in than the imperial capital of Zebrudia. The city was host to convenient public transport and advanced amenities, as well as unrivaled security provided by the strength of the empire. To top it all off, numerous underground ley lines, the pathways of mana material, generated treasure vaults of varying difficulty in the vicinity, making Zebrudia a holy land for treasure hunters.

The vast array of Relics and monster parts brought back by hunters drew in merchants from all over, their trades attracting even more hunters to the city. The more famous hunters congregated here, the safer the city grew. This cycle of prosperity allowed the Zebrudian Empire unparalleled strength among the most powerful nations of the world.

Once we, a group of kids from a remote hometown, had vowed to become treasure hunters, we'd taken carriage after carriage to make the tough journey to the distant capital. We'd been sure that its environment would test us and provide us with a shortcut to glory. In fact, my friends had become a little too refined by the experience, but even so, I still stood by our decision. The Zebrudian Empire prospered because of treasure hunters, resulting in its laws favoring them in both amenities and taxes.

The headquarters of First Steps clan stood in a prime location, overlooking one of the main streets of the capital. Clan headquarters were otherwise known as "clan houses," but the Steps' clan house was a five-story monster of a structure, having been funded by the exorbitant member's fee.

At that very moment, I was dozing off within the clan master's office on the top floor of said structure, basking in the sunlight pouring in from the wide windows, when Eva, the vice clan master, came bursting through the door.

Running a clan was far from easy. It required an entirely different skill set than that required for treasure hunting. Many clans were run by their clan master alone, but the Steps hired staff to lighten the load. The vice clan master, Eva Renfied, was one such staff member, along with nine other non-hunter employees under her.

Eva walked in with her slender, unmonstrous limbs, her amethyst eyes shining behind her red-framed glasses, her brown hair neatly tucked away. On sight alone, you could tell that she could get the job done. In fact, the clan would have crumbled to the ground without her. She was one of the many important backbones I'd recruited into the Steps, whose assignment to her post was due in no small part to the fact that I wouldn't die if she took a swing at me.

Eva saw me jolt into consciousness and let out a deep sigh. "We're on the front page, Krai."

"Ah... Seriously?"

Visibly disgruntled, Eva took the newspaper from under her arm and laid it flat on the desk. It was the latest issue of *Zebrudia Times*, the top-selling paper in the empire. The front page featured a photo of the bar we'd rented for our recruitment drive the previous day, except its sign had fallen to the ground, a hole had been blown through one wall, and several sections were ablaze. Through the freshly hammered opening in the wall, you could see a hot mess of the hunters brawling.

"Brawl Busts Out as Big Shot Braves Recruit"—or so the headline went. No doubt they'd got the wrong end of the stick, but I was too busy trying not to barf to point that out.

I feigned a big yawn as I skimmed through the article for the one thing I had to be sure of.

"Any civilian casualties?"

"Fortunately, no."

"Then we're in the clear. No harm, no foul."

A top-tier hunter could kill a normie with the flick of a finger. *Good thing I tipped the owner off to leave beforehand. Only hunters got caught in the mix.*

Our clan's motto was "No harming the normies." Destroyed buildings could be rebuilt, but not even the best Clerics in the empire could raise the dead.

I continued poring over the article, noting with relief that there was no mention of Grieving Souls. We had somewhat of a rapport with *The Times*

thanks to all of the crazy stunts my fellow Grievors had pulled in the past. Thankfully, they often let us off lightly.

But these freaks, members of the clan or hopefuls, sure didn't know how to pull punches. Even I hadn't expected them to dive head first into such a bombshell of a brawl over such a low-rank Relic. Why'd they have to go and wreck the building?

Eva, unaware of the details, glared at me through her glasses. "I was told you added fuel to the fire."

"Well, that wasn't my intention. It was already an inferno in there, just for the record."

As far as I knew, the recruitment event had given way to the chaos, but that's meatheads for you. I hadn't caught the outcome of the event because I'd got out of there as soon as the tables started flying. Heck, Li'l Gilbert had been taken out right off the bat by Tino. All hunters were extremely volatile. A little bit of heat was all it took for them to blow sky-high.

Jeez, let me move away from all this.

"How's Ark taking it?" I asked.

"I just saw him in the lounge, chortling at the front page. I don't think he's heartbroken."

That guy could really roll with the punches. He wasn't even bothered by such a blatant dig—*that* was the mark of a true hero. At the end of the day, there was more to it than brute strength. I was grateful Ark Brave was our second fiddle. On numerous occasions, they'd saved our collective butts. Anyway, Ark's reaction settled it. We'd be fine.

I tossed the paper aside and kicked my feet up on the table, letting the silver chain I'd left atop it clink. All set, I began polishing my signature rings as Eva held her temples in frustration.

"What about compensation for the bar?"

"Bill Ark for it. Don't forget to account for any lost revenue. That was the deal when we rented the place."

“The Association also has a thing or two to say.”

“Handle it however.”

By now, I was accustomed to the Association’s reprimands. I used to barf in my mouth at every word they sent, but with members like these, the complaints were year-round. For the sake of my digestive health, I couldn’t afford to barf every time we got one.

Keeping up the cool bravado, I kept at my rings as Eva kept at me.

“They want you to get over there and explain yourself, and, quote-unquote, to ‘get off your lazy ass,’” she added.

“Oh, joy,” I said, feeling knives in my stomach. “Being called up makes me *really* wanna barf.”

The capital was a city of treasure hunters. Therefore, the largest organization that managed hunters, the Explorers’ Association, held great power here. Like most clans, First Steps was a member of the Association, so there was no getting out of a summons.

Eva sighed at my callous honesty. “You should be used to it by now. How many times has it been?”

“This is one thing I’ll never get used to. Branch manager Gark scares the crap out of me. He’s killed people, no doubt. I just know it.”

“Not this again...”

The Association had branches in every major city, but Gark, head of the capital’s branch, was an ex-hunter. The former freak had switched careers after retiring from hunting, but his strength hadn’t dwindled one bit in his years away from the field.

Gark looked straight up terrifying, and he had no problem putting himself in between packs of fist-fighting hunters. To make matters worse, the man had had our backs since we’d first moved to the capital. My hands were tied.

“Man, this sucks. If I ignore him, he’ll march himself right up here.”

The one time I’d accidentally ignored Gark’s summons had become a huge pain in the behind. Ever since, Gark had remained pretty high up on my “don’t

fuck with” list. Besides, his assistant branch manager was a real angel who kept the guy’s wrath in check, so meeting him there would make my life a whole load easier.

I would’ve loved to send someone in my stead, but Eva, who handled practically every aspect of the clan, was no hunter. I couldn’t knowingly send her in there.

“Maybe I’ll have Ark go.”

“Don’t you think you rely too much on him?”

It’s not like I can send anyone else. Strength by no means equals virtue with these hotheads. I sat for a while, desperately racking my brain for any other solution, but to no avail.

“All right. I’ll go if I have to, but only ’cause there’s no other choice. I don’t wanna go out there, especially not without a guard. That disguise Relic of mine isn’t any use either since I busted it.”

If the other Grievors were here, one of them would have tagged along for my protection, but they were currently off taking on another high-level treasure vault, so there was no telling when they’d return.

“You’ll be fine. This is the capital, you know?”

“Spoken like someone who’s never been attacked in the street. Of course, it’s been a while since we kept crushing them.”

I placed my favorite among my newly polished rings onto my index finger and dropped the rest into a bag. From there, I bunched up my chain, fastening it to my belt, and stood up. *Better get this out of the way.*

Maybe it was time to dust off my showstopping groveling routine.

The Zebrudia branch of the Explorers’ Association stood nestled between a large shop and a bar, about a fifteen minutes’ walk from our clan headquarters. The branch was pretty small compared to the neighboring buildings, but it was no less lively than either of them. A modest flag depicting a treasure chest (the symbol of the Association) against a red background fluttered above.

I glanced left and right before entering the building. I had to barf, and stepping into that sauna of the freak show didn't do me any favors.

There was a distinct difference between treasure hunters and ordinary folk. It had nothing to do with age, sex, or equipment, but somehow, you could just tell by looking at them. If I had to explain, I'd say they were a whole other species.

Though the capital was widely regarded as the holy land of treasure hunting, the city's hunter population wasn't all that large. Running into a hunter on the street was a pretty rare occurrence. That considered, a hive like this, which was teeming with freaks, was, in my book, one of the most dangerous spots in the city.

The open lobby was filled with the clamor of shouting, laughter, and drunken singing. It was like a war zone. Its distinctive smell pervaded my nostrils: blood, booze, and sweat, what some may call the stench of adventure.

An enormous man two heads taller than me shot me a dirty look as he passed me, without a word. It was hard to believe we were both of the same species.

The Explorers' Association existed to support hunters. They'd been around for as long as the treasure-hunting occupation itself, handling everything a hunter could possibly require: the buying and selling of Relics and monster parts, supplying parties with necessary items and information, and even referring potential party members. They were also the ones who ranked hunters, parties, and clans by assigning them levels.

Non-hunters weren't barred from entering treasure vaults, per se; it was just a really dumbass thing to do. The much less deadly start to becoming a hunter was to join the Association.

Membership wasn't free, of course. Every hunter had to pay a tax derived from their annual income, in addition to performing other obligations. Once in a while, they'd even drop quests on you that were nothing short of punishment.

Any clan as large as the Steps could take care of themselves, and many of them were doing just that. I, however, preferred to stay on the Association's good side, and since our dues were manageable, I'd accepted my role as Association dogsbody. And heck, their drop-dead gorgeous receptionist sure sweetened the deal. I could learn a thing or two from the way they ran their

branch.

I shouldered my way through the horde of hunters, my back straight and my head held high as I endured their musk of blood and adrenaline. Wading through these hunters with battle scars on their faces and bandages covering fresh wounds scared the hell out of me, but I knew from experience that keeping my head down would only make me more of a target.

This was a place where the weak were eaten alive. It didn't matter that we were in the middle of a civilized city. Hunters only spoke one language: violence.

Just then, I caught sight of a hunter sprawled over a newspaper. It wasn't a copy of *Zebrudia Times*, but the front page displayed the same half-destroyed bar.

It wasn't my fault. I'm serious here. Don't those vultures have anything else to report on?!

"It sure is lonely at the top, huh?" I muttered, a sardonic grin masking my urge to barf, as I lined up at the reception.

Despite my frantic prayers for my turn to never come, I was soon welcomed by the girl behind the counter.

"Thank you for visiting the Explorers' Association!" the dark-haired receptionist said, flashing me a divine smile.

From what I'd heard, she wasn't a hunter, which was a back-end setup I could get behind.

I slammed my hand against the counter, mustering as much fake swagger as I could to best maintain my facade as a badass hunter. "I need to speak to branch manager Gark," I said in a low voice. "He's expecting me. Put me through."

Unaffected by my aggressive performance, the receptionist maintained a perfect smile. "Ah, yes. This is about the demolished bar, no? One scolding, coming right up. Oh, and just as a reminder, Mr. Andrey, you don't have to wait in line when you've been summoned."

She meant *half*-demolished, no doubt.

“I’m so, so, so, so, so, sooo sorry!”

Sincerity was the key to an effective apology. My self-righteous attitude in public was merely for show. I had no problem throwing my pride out the window when I met Gark—he’d seen me in way more pitiful situations than this.

Even the veteran branch manager was taken aback by my immediate prostration. His eyes widened as he stared down at me.



Gark Welter may have looked like a freak, but deep down, he was a human. He stood above two meters tall, scars and tattoos crisscrossing his face, his bald head bulging with veins. He kept himself in such good shape that you wouldn't believe he was retired. Between that and the weapon he kept close at hand, he looked like a serial killer. Even so, Gark was a human—a human of high importance, in fact.

Kaina, the beautiful and skilled assistant branch manager, was smiling beside Gark, plainly the beauty to his beast. Even so, I was pretty sure a literal beast would be better tempered than he was. It was good to see him again.

“Hey, uh, Krai?”

“None of this was on purpose. I didn't mean any harm! I made sure no civilians would get hurt, and I even spoke to the owner beforehand and got his permission to wreck the place!” I was out of breath before Gark had a chance to recover from his surprise.

Precisely because I was talentless, I understood hunters inside and out, as though from a non-hunter's perspective. I'd thought long and hard in advance about the consequences of my actions and gone to great lengths to avoid any serious trouble. Since becoming a hunter, the skills I'd improved on the most were apologizing, shmoozing, and talking my way out of things—skills to write home about, am I right?

I theatrically gesticulated to emphasize my tragic predicament. “You know I'm having just as much of a hard time dealing with them. They don't stop no matter what I do, so what choice did I have but to let them duke it out?! Go on; tell me how I was supposed to stop this from happening. You don't think I wanted to?! Of course I did! If you can solve that mystery, be my freakin' guest!”

Keeping them from fighting wasn't an option. It really wasn't. That was why I'd let them blow off all that steam where no civilians would get hurt.

Skiping the excuses might have served me better in most situations, but I was fishing for sympathy. After all, there was no way Gark was actually mad about this. For one thing, no normies got hurt. On top of that, no normies got hurt. And most importantly, no normies hurt.

The Association cracked down hard on hunter misconduct, but they didn't punish every misdemeanor —that'd be impossible. If they handed out fines for every fight, the Association headquarters would be a castle by now.

I rose suddenly to my feet, still apologizing as I closed in on Gark.

He stepped back, seemingly intimidated. “Hey now, you're not gonna beat your gums out of this one.”

“All they did was tear down a building!” I wailed, pleading through my urge to barf. “So what if we made the front page?! There were no casualties! No complaints! What's the big deal with smashing down a building or two?! That's way better than tearing through people! Look, we'll pay for the damages. I'm thick as thieves with the owner, and he's a super chill guy! It's fine. He'll laugh it off. Damn, I want some ice cream.”

The half-razed bar in question served incredible ice cream, despite it being a bar. In fact, it was one of the top three ice cream joints in the capital, according to me.

Finally, Kaina spoke up, her smile stretched thin. “Now, now. Calm down, Krai. There's no reason for Gark to be hard on you. No one's pressed any charges.”

Kaina's “now, now” spiel usually quelled Gark's rage. They had a good dynamic: Gark would lose his rag at people, while Kaina sought to offer compromises.

Sure enough, Gark sighed. “I haven't even... Whatever. Take a seat.”

And all was forgiven. At least all this apologizing had its merits.

I obediently parked myself on the plush couch, my need to barf slightly lessened. Just as I let myself relax for a moment, Gark slammed his hand on the table. I trembled from shock.

Bearing his teeth, the branch manager glowered at me. “You think I like calling you up here, Krai?”

Then why did you? I thought.

Gark continued like a reproachful school teacher. “No one's pressed charges, but even without any official complaints, that stunt of yours caused enough

commotion to hit the papers. First Steps is one of the top dogs. A clan as prominent as that ought to be thinking of the example they're setting for other hunters. I can't let something like this one slide."

I stared at Gark, dumbfounded. He should have wagged his finger and sent me on my way by now.

Judging by the standards of the Association, this case should have been water under the bridge, easy breezy. No one (hunters notwithstanding) had gotten hurt. Destruction of property was punishable by imperial law, but this case would be settled by the terms of our agreement.

If no one pressed charges, there was no reason for law enforcement to get involved. Sure, the papers had snapped up the story, but hunters were always making bad decisions. A bar almost crumbling to the ground was on the tamer side of the consequences, and there was no way Gark, a professional shit sweeper, saw it any other way.

Case in point, things would have been much worse if any of the other Grievors had been there. The most any reader of *these* headlines would have to say would be "they're at it again." Us, a role model for hunters? Ha, what a joke.

I turned to Kaina to see her strained smile. *So that's it. Well, I could always leave all this up to Ark.*

"Don't tell me. Chores?" I asked.

Gark looked like he'd bit into a lemon.

The Association's main purpose was to help hunters beat treasure vaults, but they also delved in the side hustle of referring third-party quests to its members. Since most hunters were superhumanly strong, merchants and even governments often sought them out for work: guarding caravans, hunting monsters, acquiring specific Relics, and the like.

The requested tasks came in all shapes and forms, and were most often taken up by novice hunters looking for some extra cash or by hunters looking to make connections outside of the hunter community. However, many of the quests struggled to find takers, be it for their measly rewards, lengthy duration, overwhelming difficulty, or downright bizarre nature.

Most hunters, myself included, had no sympathy for those who submitted these crappy quests. They simply weren't our problem. That was until the Association, compelled by some bureaucratic conundrum, started assigning them to pushovers and miscreants. With the utmost reverence, us hunters called these quests "chores" and avoided them like the plague.

Gark's eyelids twitched menacingly. "Don't talk like that in my office."

"You're an ex-hunter, Gark. You know better than anyone that this stuff's a pain. I'm responsible for my clan members' lives, after all."

Clans came in many different forms, but ours was a democracy. Even my role as clan master had been decided by a majority vote, so I wasn't exactly all-powerful.

Now that the tables had turned, I wasted no time, reclining back and crossing my legs. I met Gark's death glare with a sigh; the student had become the master. "Relax, I'm not saying we won't do it. We've known each other for years, Gark, so I understand where you're coming from. We'll do you a solid, but just one. We didn't even screw up that bad this time."

"You get better at goading every time I see you, Krai," Kaina remarked.

I kowtowed when I had to kowtow, and stood my ground when I had to stand it. That was my way of staying alive. Cowardice was the real killer here. Of course, I would have never pulled a stunt like this if I less than wholeheartedly trusted Gark not to mop the ground with me.

Gark ground his teeth at my conceited attitude. "Bring it over," he growled.

Kaina produced a leather-bound folder and placed it in front of me.

Quests referred this way by the Association were pretty much mandatory, but I had heard rumors of hunters who simply refused to take any of them. Many hunters danced to their own tune and hated being tied down. This was especially true for experienced hunters who could take on the more troublesome quests.

The folder sure was hefty, indicating a large pileup of chores. While I did feel sorry for Gark for having accumulated such a cumbersome stack of stinkers, our clan didn't run on charity. It would be one and done.

Gark glared with murder in his eyes. “Pick one.”

“Yessir.”

I started flipping through the files. At least there were loads to choose from. I was looking to pick out the easiest gig to foist it off on Ark.

Just thinking about most of these jobs was giving me a headache. Ark could have handled any one of them, being one of the best hunters in the capital, but his forte really lied in taking on treasure vaults.

With that in mind, I picked out only quests in that area. Then I began scanning the level of the vaults involved. *Level 5, Level 6, Level 5, another 5, Level 4, Level 6, 4, 3, 7, 6— Wait, a Level 3?!*

I flipped back to that particular file and checked the rest of the page. *Yeah, this shouldn't be a problem.* Heck, I'd hit the jackpot to score a Level 3 treasure vault quest from a pile of reject chores.

Not only was Ark Rodin one of the only capital hunters with an official title, the Argent Thunderstorm, he was ranked at an impressive Level 7. The number indicated that the Association had deemed Ark capable of taking on any vault up to that rank. While each vault packed its own set of challenges, a Level 3 vault would be a walk in the park for the guy, even if he went in alone. The job paid close to nothing and would take him some time to complete, but it wouldn't exactly be a challenge.

With such slim pickings, there was no point in overthinking it. I plucked out the file and waved it in Gark's face. “We'll take this one. A little bit of carcass-collecting never hurt anyone.”

“Watch your mouth, Krai! That's a search and rescue.”

He was joking, right? There was no way those guys were still alive.

The storm had passed. Once Krai left the room, assistant branch manager Kaina breathed a sigh of relief. With the urgent quest folder tucked under her arm, she flashed Gark a tight-lipped smile. “The kid's as lively as ever, I see. Are you sure about this?”

Gark grunted, hand on his head. “It’s fine. He’s better off with some wind in his sails.” The scorn in his expression earlier had now left without a trace.

Hunters were an odd bunch to begin with, but Krai Andrey was far odder still. Krai had become a hunter five years prior, when the capital branch had accepted his application. One could even say that Gark had overseen Krai’s entire career as a hunter.

Krai had moved to the capital with five good friends from his hometown, who had all become hunters along with him. Gangs of starry-eyed teens hung up on classic tales of adventure weren’t all that uncommon to come by. That said, not many of them survived more than a few years as treasure hunters.

Despite the demands of the profession, Krai had barely changed from the day he’d signed up; his feeble visage, flippant attitude, and even his shrewd ploys were much the same. He was marching unchanged on the path to glory, which made the kid quite the abnormal case for a hunter.

The First Steps were the rising stars of the capital. There were plenty of older, larger clans in the city, but those were already fully established. The Steps, on the other hand, was still in its infancy. What the clan lacked in experience, it made up for in rate of growth. Their presence on the front page was a testament to their popularity.

In contrast to First Steps’ roaring growth, Krai was the perfect picture of humility—a quality that Gark was grateful for. For a clan with as many connections and much strength as the Steps, there was little to gain from remaining under contract with the Association. By now, many established clans, parties, and individual hunters had withdrawn from the Association umbrella, which was a regular source of headaches for Gark. Skillful hunters were worth their weight in gold to the place, but he couldn’t exactly stop them from leaving. Despite Krai’s flippant tone and brazen manner, he was doing his bit to look out for them.

“He was muttering stuff about wanting an easy one. Then he snagged the worst of the bunch.”

“Well, that’s not so unexpected from Krai.” Kaina allowed herself a faint smile as she thought of how Krai had reached for that particular quest out of a folder

of at least two dozen.

The vault level on it may have been the lowest among them, but that didn't necessarily mean that that vault would be the easiest. Identifying danger was one of the most vital skills for any leader to possess, and the form Krai had read was wrought with warnings.

Neither Gark nor Kaina thought for one second that Krai, the leader of Grieving Souls and the master of such a large and prominent clan, would misjudge the severity of a quest. In fact, when Krai had been confronted with similar situations in the past, he had often gone for the hardest of hitters. Perhaps this was his way of giving back a little.

"Who knows what'll come of it. Krai's on it now, though, whatever it is. His attitude's one thing, but he's got a good eye for these things."

"We sure do owe him one, don't we?"

When I returned to the clan house, chore in hand, I was slapped with unexpected news.

"What? Ark's not here? Why not?"

Eva responded without looking up from her papers. "A noble summoned him to discuss that Prism Garden job he cleared the other day. No doubt he won't be back for some time."

"Oh, gotcha. Talk about bad timing."

Ark Brave was one of the most famous parties in the capital, and its leader, the oh-so-friendly, oh-so-handsome Ark, radiated tolerance unbecoming of a hunter; not to mention he was incredibly kick-ass. It was only natural that he would be called up by one of the empire's nobles, who were always looking to win over the freshest and finest. I should have seen it coming after he'd mopped the floor with that high-level vault the other day. All things considered, I was lucky to have had him until that morning.

Still, the timing sucked. I'd pretty much picked our chore at random, thinking Ark could be the one to take the rap. The guy was a tip-top employee aside

from his many commitments.

“Sheesh. What am I supposed to do with this now then?”

“Why don’t you do it yourself?”

Is she saying I’m better off dead? By the look in her eyes, she was serious about it too.

Some people—more often than not, non-hunters—had a nasty habit of underestimating treasure vaults, but those guys were living under a rock. Trust me; I’ve seen plenty of high-level vaults up close. All treasure vaults were packed with peril, and high-level vaults in particular were dangerous in and of themselves. Even if no phantoms or monsters appeared, there was no guarantee you’d return.

The chore I’d brought back entailed a Level 3 vault, so it wasn’t that dangerous a job. That said, a non-hunter wouldn’t stand a chance in anything higher than Level 1. Besides, I was one foot into retiring from the front lines.

“I haven’t taken on a vault in a while, so I’m probably pretty weak now.”

“That’s what they call slacking off.”

Hunters were strong—a whole other level of strong—and that freakish strength of theirs was in part due to the buildup of mana material. Since treasure vaults were chock full of mana material, hunters who spent most of their time raiding were constantly exposed to the stuff. As a result, hunters obtained powers beyond normal human capabilities.

By absorbing mana material, hunters gained all kinds of boosts to their abilities. Chief among them was to their physical strength, but I had heard of some hunters who had developed special talents as a result. That considered, the more time a hunter spent in treasure vaults and the higher the level of those vaults were, the stronger the hunter became.

However, mana material didn’t stick around the body forever. The time it took to deplete varied from person to person, but for hunters like me, who stayed in areas devoid of mana material, the power accumulated within the body quickly runs dry, reverting them to ordinary civilian status. This was why some hunters, those who continuously delved into treasure vaults, were

stronger than most military personnel.

I'd always been weak and talentless, but stepping away from the front lines had only made me weaker. A Level 3 treasure vault wasn't much of a challenge to the average member of our clan, but it was an impossible feat for me, who was one half step away from civilianhood.

And while we're at it, I just didn't feel like doing it. If the deal had been that I would have to take up the gauntlet myself, I would have flat out refused. I was the weakest member of the Steps by far, and I took that role *very* seriously.

Still, where there's a will, there's a way. I turned on my heel, humming. Ark or no Ark, I had the entire roster of the Steps at my disposal. I was the clan master, after all. "Oh well. There's gotta be someone in the lounge looking for a job to do."

Eve frowned at me. "You really shouldn't be delegating urgent quests."

That was morally upstanding of her to say and all, but we all had to play to our strengths.

On the second floor of First Steps clan house was the lounge: an open space bathed in sunlight from the large skylights installed in the ceilings. There were as many large tables in the room as there were parties in the clan, in addition to a bar by the wall. The lounge was a pretty convenient meeting spot, but it was more often the chosen hangout for members with free time on their hands, who could take advantage of the free drinks and simple meals offered at the bar.

The dues I charged the clan members paid for said food and drink. I couldn't very well pocket any of that money, so I let Eva take care of finding ways to burn through any excess funds. Now it was one of the main selling points of our clan. It's funny how things turn out.

I took a sweeping look around our magnificent lounge, then frowned in disappointment. "Huh. No one's here. What are the odds?"

"Good morning, master! You're all barefaced again. What happened to your mask?"

“It broke.”

It was the middle of the day, and Tino was the only one there. Where were the goons? Poor Tino had been sitting all alone reading a book.

To say that she was the one responsible for nearly destroying that bar, there wasn't a trace of remorse in her expression as she approached me. “I like your real face much better than that weird mask.”

“I'd have been destroyed beyond repair if you'd said you prefer the mask to my face.”

Until very recently, I had always kept my identity hidden with a special Relic: the Reversible Face, a mask of flesh that allowed me to change my face and voice at will.

Some hunters were all about having their faces remembered, but I was the opposite. That Relic had allowed me to maintain my sanity. But now it was gone—broken—and I had no spare.

Relics weren't manufactured, but rather came into being. Rare Relics were not only difficult to come by, but spectacularly expensive. What's worse, Relics that hid the user's identity from everyone without a certain level of perception couldn't be legally bought or sold. The only way to obtain one of these things was by stumbling across one in a treasure vault.

My only option was to stay indoors as much as possible. I was gonna barf.

Tino was restlessly looking around like a loyal puppy. “Master, where's Lizzy?” she asked.

“Wait, didn't she tell you? Liz and the others are off hitting up a treasure vault. That Level 8 castle. They were pretty set on going deep and bringing something back this time. I doubt they'll be back anytime soon.”

If any one of them had stayed behind, they could have taken care of this chore off my hands. The timing sure did suck. All chores had deadlines, which meant it couldn't wait for them to come back.

Tino blinked several times, giving me an odd look before her smile returned. “By the way, master, look what I got,” she said, presenting her left palm to me.

I nearly choked as Tino waved the familiar Relic ring. Ugh, I hadn't expected this. Tino Shade was indeed improving at breakneck speed, but she still had a long way to go before she'd match up to the most powerful freaks around. I had caught her wasting Li'l Gilbert with that sucker kick, but she wasn't skilled enough to fend off every freakish foe.

At least, that's what I'd thought, but the ring in her hand spoke for itself. Our cute little mascot had grown into a full-fledged freak herself. That was unless the other freaks of the clan couldn't bring themselves to take it from her.

"I don't care one bit about that fake pretty boy's party, but I couldn't let your ring fall into the hands of that little skunk. I can feel your will pouring through it, master."

"You know that's just a Shooting Ring, right?"

"Shooting Ring" was an umbrella term for ring Relics that fired shots of mana. Relics came in all shapes and forms, and had all sorts of abilities, but ring-type Relics were among the most common of all. Shooting Rings were the most common form of ring Relics, and were therefore the least valuable among them. That big-ass sword Li'l Gilbert had been waving around was probably much more valuable.

Still, since Tino had snagged the ring first, I didn't have to add any potential weirdos to Ark's party. I'd lucked out there.

Tino looked so happy about the ring that I was starting to feel kind of guilty.

"There's much to learn from what we can't see," she said, staring at it intently. "That fake pretty boy said it was a fun event."

"Ark. His name is Ark."

"Master, can I really keep this?"

"I said so, didn't I? It's all yours. Sorry it's not something better."

"Yay!"

Not many hunters used Shooting Rings. It was hardly any use to Tino either, but that didn't seem to bother her. Heck, she was twirling around with happy little cheers.

Wow, was she really that easy to please? I could have shed a tear for her. After all, she was the only one left. She'd do. She was Level 4, so she shouldn't have a problem with a Level 3 vault.

"Do you have any plans today, Tino?"

"What?" Tino froze in her tracks, her eyes widening in bewilderment. Since she worked on her own most of the time, she had a relatively flexible schedule, but that didn't mean she could take time off whenever she wanted.

A hunter's job encompassed more than just hunting. They had to keep up with their training if they wanted to perform at their best, and prior research was essential to staying safe in each vault. The clan could support her to some extent, but lack of preparation cost hunters their lives. Solo hunting demanded even more meticulous prep.

However, Tino soon beamed, which was pretty rare for her. "No! I don't have any plans today, tomorrow, or for the rest of my life! That's why I've been waiting for you, master!"

If Liz had overheard, Tino would have been thrown into the most grueling training regimen her mentor could think of. Did Tino really have so much free time? Since she apparently had nothing better to do, I felt less bad about assigning her the chore.

"Perfect. The Association gave us a quest. I'll leave it to you."

"What?" Tino looked like I'd slapped her across the face. "Master, I've never in my life felt more betrayed. My innocent heart is in tatters. I never thought you could be so cruel. You tricked me."

"I did not."

"You led me on, only to push me off a cliff."

"I didn't lead you anywhere or push you off of anything."

Tino had already lost all of her enthusiasm before she'd even got going. All hope had been extinguished from her eyes. She laid her cheek flat on the table, glaring at me with newfound lethargy. "To be honest, I was ready to go get ice cream together, or something."

Tino had a profound weakness for all things sweet—a weakness I was sure would be exploited someday. “Your mentor told me not to give you anything sweet.”

“It’s a ploy. Lizzy doesn’t want you to go on dates with me when she’s not around.”

Dates? Like mentor, like apprentice, I supposed. Maybe it was my fault for taking her everywhere for a while instead of a proper bodyguard.

I’d known her since she was just starting out, so she was almost as easy to use as Ark and my longtime friends. Her cuteness was also a plus. Asking tough-looking hunks of muscle to do dirty work took one hell of a mental toll.

I shoved the assignment into Tino’s dejected face. “Here, Tino, Tino, Tino. I’ve got a fun job for you. Who wants to go on a job? Who?”

“Am I just a clanmate with benefits to you?”

“I think someone’s tainted our little Tino’s mind.”

Who’d taught her this stuff?

“That was you, master.”

Her spirits still deflated, Tino started reading with only her eyes. She stared at the paper for a few moments before muttering, “This is the crappiest quest ever.”

“Sure is.”

“There’s not a single silver lining. Who’d want any part of this?”

“Great question.”

“This is a chore, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh.”

That’s how I’d found myself with it. *Damn that Gark, treating our clan like a trash can.* If there hadn’t been a familiar face I could talk into taking it on, I would have turned down this dirty work, even if it meant having an awkward conversation with Gark. The weak were always left to scoop up crap jobs like this. Some things never changed.

The disgusted Tino writhed in her seat before coming up with an excuse. “I’m still only Level 4, master. A nobody. I would love to help you, I really would, but I’ll have to respectfully resign myself. I can’t rescue five people on my own. Besides, I just remembered something I have to do.”

Tino leapt up. I blinked, and she was running out the door, leaving the trash-tier quest behind without a taker. *As expected of a budding Thief.*

What a truly spectacular escape act. That explained how Tino had ended up with the Relic ring; she’d taken it and ran. Bolting from Liz’s backbreaking training sessions was doing wonders for Tino. Come to think of it, she and I had a lot in common.

I unbunched the two-meter-long chain from my belt and placed it on the table. The chain was a Relic: one of a vast collection I’d amassed throughout my career as a hunter. The thin silver chain slithered like a serpent around the table, its links clanging as it moved.

The chain was a loyal beast—a fangless dog that required neither food nor rest, forever faithful to its master. It was called the Hounding Chain.

In the ancient past, before recorded history, was a tribe of people that wielded chains: chains treated in a special way that moved without being touched. Each chain had possessed an extraordinary power that supported the tribe’s livelihood. Today, all that remained of that civilization were the legends that told its tales, and I attributed the popularity of chain Relics to those legends.

The chain rose from the table, forming the outline of a small canine. When I jerked my chin, the chain fell flat and slithered out of the lounge.

“Just for the record, master, I could have run away.”

“Yeah. Totally.”

“Your chain is persistent, tireless, and annoying, but I could easily break it.” Tino said all this with a straight face, despite being bound by a chain that could have rendered the mightiest man immobile. “I’m not gonna, though, because I don’t want you to hate me for breaking your favorite chain. Don’t you feel like

being a *little* merciful in my judgment, now?”

Tino was pleading with the same manipulative tone often employed by her mentor. She was learning all the wrong lessons.

While my Hounding Chain was silver in color, it wasn't made of silver. Anything made from mana material was extremely durable. That said, plenty of freaks I hung around could easily tear it apart. Tino's confidence showed just how much she'd been pushing herself—and how much time she'd spent in vaults.

“Don't work yourself too hard, Tino. Safety first.”

“It's your fault, master.”

“Your mentor's the one encouraging it. I only give you the easy stuff.” At this point, the Hounding Chain relaxed and fell to the floor.

Relics were handy and all, but had their limitations. The chain must have run out of mana (its energy source) while chasing Tino around. Her skill in being able to evade high-speed things in pursuit was actually impressive.

Rubbing herself where the chain had constricted her, Tino let out a sigh. “I get it. I understand that you give us quests that bring us to the brink of death and back to maximize our growth, but there has to be a limit to your draconian training methods.”

“Excuse me?”

What part of this was draconian? The quest was at a Level 3 treasure vault. Level 3. That wasn't exactly difficult for Tino. I wouldn't feed our mascot to the wolves. She just had to pick up a few bodies.

Treasure vaults were fraught with danger. Hunters assumed those risks when they stepped foot into any vault. Rescue missions for failed hunters were few and far between. On rare occasions, though, quests popped up requesting aid for lost hunters, quests that were more bitterly known by those stuck with them as carcass-collecting gigs.

When professional hunters went missing, they were more often than not already dead. If they were alive, they got rescued; if they were dead, we

checked them off the list and went on our way. But as long as there was the slightest chance that the lost hunters were still alive, some poor soul had to go check.

For as much flak as I gave her, Tino was a Level 4 hunter. Maybe there was a reason she was reluctant to go. Feeling pretty stumped, I took another look at the request.

The Level 3 vault in question was the White Wolf's Den, not one of the easiest nor the most difficult vaults close to the capital. When it came to Relics, its drop rate sucked, which made the vault neither lucrative nor popular.

Three days ago, five hunters had gone missing. That wasn't too long ago. If it had been a week ago, I wouldn't have held out hope for their survival, but as it stood, I was calling it fifty-fifty.

The quest would last a maximum of a week, with a reward of three hundred thousand gild. That amount, which could feed the average household for a month, was more like pocket change for a hunter. In other words, this was basically volunteer work.

I reread the request line by line, but couldn't identify the problem. Even so, I looked up from it and gave a knowing nod. "I understand what you're saying, Tino. You don't want to go alone, right?"

I got it. I really did. Underleveled or not, taking on any treasure vault was a dangerous task. Anything could happen. I'd been shortsighted in thinking Tino wouldn't mind taking on another quest alone. In fact, I'd gone along with this assuming they were all dead, but if they were alive, she'd have no chance. She couldn't carry five injured hunters.

"What? Well, I guess you're right." Tino glanced around the empty lounge before turning back to look at me expectantly. After all, everyone was busy today.

That was when I had a bright idea.

The White Wolf's Den... Something about that name sounded familiar. Since Tino was Level 4, a few more Level 3 or higher hunters should make her feel more secure. It was brilliant, if I do say so myself.

Tino timidly piped up again. “If you would come with me, master—”

“I’ve got it! There was a hunter at the recruitment drive last night who wanted to take on the White Wolf’s Den. You should take her with you. I think her name was Rhuda.”

“What?”

As for the rest of the party, the Great Greg and Li’l Gilbert would work a treat. To top it all off, it’d be a good first-party experience for Tino. It was all coming together.

With that settled, I gave myself a pat on the back, closely watched by Tino’s pain-stricken eyes.

Chapter Two: Wall Spaghetti

Tino Shade, born and raised in the imperial capital, was a Zebrudian through and through. One could even say she was a little more reserved than most, despite her athleticism. More importantly, though, Tino had never wanted to become a treasure hunter.

At some point in their lives, everyone dreamed of trying their hand at hunting, but discerning adults weren't so keen on taking such a dangerous plunge.

Zebrudia was chock-full of hunters and facilities related to the profession, but everyone had their place in life. Tino herself wasn't drawn to power, fame, or wealth. In fact, she was quite scared of hunters. Though she admired the great hunters she read about in stories, their lives had always seemed a far cry from her own.

That life of hers had been turned on its head when a certain party had arrived in the capital, descending upon it like a shooting star. Among the countless parties with their fancy names, none had stuck out more than this one. The party, once shunned for their ghoulish name and antagonized by the empire itself, had overcome every obstacle until, in just a few years, they had become a household name.

Only by coincidence had Tino, who had lived so far removed from treasure hunters, come across that party, but that was all it had taken. One look, and she couldn't take her eyes off them. The girl who had before now had no interest in hunting had become mesmerized by their dazzling gleam—a gleam like a spark or a shooting star.

The party's arrival had ignited a new era.

The young hero Ark Rodin was rumored to be the second coming of one of only three Level 10 hunters in the world. Beside him stood Krai Andrey, the cunning bearer of Grieving Souls' reins, who founded the fastest growing clan in the vicinity.

As if gravitating towards these two young hunters, whose talent shone brighter than any others', more and more talented young hunters emerged. This marked the golden age of treasure hunting, or so the Association described it.

Tino knew in her bones that this era would go down in legend and chose to become a hunter to carve her name alongside that of her master and trusted mentor.

Now, however, the budding newcomer Tino had been demoted from apprentice to errand girl by the very master she adored.

After a quick hunt around the capital branch of the Explorers' Association, she caught sight of her target. Tino approached the hunter browsing jobs posted on the quest board. When she was about a meter behind the hunter, the brown-haired, blue-eyed girl turned around. She saw Tino standing there and froze, wide-eyed.

This was the hunter who had been with her master at the recruitment event. Krai had given Tino a description of her, but the girl's appearance had been burned into Tino's memory the moment she'd caught sight of them together.

The hunter's name was Rhuda Runebeck, a Level 3 who had come to the recruitment drive in the hopes of finding party members to take on the White Wolf's Den. Her stance showed that she muffled her footsteps by second nature, which was a surefire giveaway that Rhuda was a Thief, the same as Tino.

Although they shared a profession, Rhuda was at a lower level than Tino, who was receiving proper training by her famous—albeit meatheaded—mentor. Rhuda wouldn't have noticed Tino and her silent footsteps until she was up close.

"Wh-What?" she sputtered, surprised by Tino's sudden appearance. "What is it? Oh, you're the one who was with Krai yesterday."

None of that mattered. This was a request from her master, who was adored by her beloved mentor, and her master's decision was absolute.

Stilling the whirlwind of disgust within her, Tino stated her business. "I come

at my master's—*Krai Andrey's* request. I need to talk to you. Come with me."

Rhuda's eyes widened further, but Tino turned her back, already on the hunt for the other subjects her master had given her the names of.

The Great Greg was at The Golden Key, a bar frequented by treasure hunters, that stood next to the Association building. Tino interrupted the merriment of the Great Greg and his peers to give a minimal summary of her request.

Truth be told, Tino wasn't keen on the assignment. She didn't mind the quest itself so much; a Level 3 vault was easy enough to take on alone. It was the party members that she hadn't come to terms with.

Treasure hunters were encouraged to form parties, since going it alone in unknown vaults was often far too risky. Hardly any hunters excelled at all aspects of treasure hunting; forming up simply allowed them to cover more bases. With that in mind, one might wonder why solo hunters existed at all.

Simply put, it was extremely difficult for hunters to form a stable party. Differences in specialty, character, drive, values, and talent were all causes for clash. According to statistics gathered by the Association, fewer than one in ten parties lasted over five years.

Exploring treasure vaults was a matter of life and death, making working with members that stepped on one another's toes a huge source of stress—stress that could get you stabbed in the back. One of the golden rules of treasure hunting was to be extremely careful when choosing who to take on.

Tino, at least, considered herself better off alone than forming up with hunters she was incompatible with. And she and the party members her master had assigned her were *very* incompatible indeed. Their skill sets, personality types, and overall objectives were all discordant with hers. She would have trusted her master with her life, but this was a different matter.

This isn't what I meant at all, master. I wanted to go with you, not with a bunch of strangers.

As Tino stood there, wallowing in her regret, the Great Greg pondered the offer. *Turn me down, Tino thought, then I can tell master I tried.* She had interrupted him drinking with his friends. He could very well laugh her out of

the building.

As Tino clung to that thread of hope, the Great Greg's face twisted into a smile. "You betcha," the man ruthlessly declared. "Sorry, guys. See ya later."

The next haunt of the list was First Steps clan house. Its lounge in particular was well-known among hunters. The clean space and stylish bar made it unlike any other joint in town, decked out with white tables and enough chairs to seat full parties around them. This wasn't a place suited for raging parties, but Steps parties often met up in the lounge to celebrate after making it through treasure vaults alive.

In one corner of the lounge, Rhuda was looking around nervously. Greg was cocking a brow in curiosity, somewhat more quiet than usual. Tino, the ringleader, was staring straight ahead, devastated.

"So what's this all about?" Rhuda asked.

"This is the famous Steps lounge, huh? I'll take getting in here as a win," Greg added.

Tino was staring at a boy a little taller than her, who was sitting there grumpily with a greatsword Relic—the Purgatorial Sword—strapped to his back. Tino could have cried out that her party members had all convened. What had she done to deserve this treatment from her master?

The boy, Gilbert Bush, quietly growled. "What's this about? I don't have all day." The greatsword on his back shone in the sunlight.

Gilbert was the runt Tino had beaten to a pulp during the recruitment event. Of all three hunters appointed by her master, he was the one Tino wanted to include in her party the least.

Considering that attitude of his, she hadn't expected him to tag along, not that she'd had any intention of actually finding him in the first place. If she hadn't run into him on her way out of the bar, she would've reported back that she'd failed to find him.

In fact, Tino would have been completely happy if she hadn't located any of the three hunters sitting before her. Only out of respect for her master had she gone through the motions of searching for them. That should have been the

end of it, but she'd somehow managed to find all three of the ragtag bunch—in such a *vast* city—almost by accident.

Even so, there was still hope. There was still a chance they could turn her down. Tino wasn't the only one touchy about parties, not to mention a temp party for a practically thankless chore. Heck, Tino couldn't call any one of them an acquaintance, let alone a friend. All things considered, they were more likely to tell her where to stuff her quest.

She drew a deep breath and readied herself, clinging to her last hope. *I'm sorry, master, she thought. I'll never again complain about working alone. Please, save me.*

Three pairs of eyes awaited Tino's next words. With quivering shoulders and an unseen knife to her throat, the little Thief began to beg. "Please, once you hear what I have to say, feel free to say no. Master has assigned me a chore to complete, and he suggested I form a party with the three of you. That's why I asked you here: to ask you to join my party. Please feel free to say no. Please."

In my office on the top floor of the clan house, which was off-limits to the average member, I had just finished describing my master plan to Eva.

She stared at me in silence for a few moments before her eyes glinted behind her glasses. "That sounds to me like throwing spaghetti at the wall."

"How dare you?" I retorted. That was extremely rude of her, no matter how accurate the statement was.

"Isn't it premature to have Tino lead a party when she's spent her whole career hunting solo?"

"I'm doing her a favor, you know," I replied with a purposefully stoic expression. She only sighed.

Eva had a point, though. I may have been the leader of the Grievors and master of the Steps, but I didn't exactly fret about my decisions.

Back in the beginning, I'd spent many a sleepless night mulling things over, but I'd grown tired of that pretty quickly. I'd always been the one making

decisions for our party, and the number of those decisions had only increased when I'd established the Steps. Since we'd made a name for ourselves, parties and clans we weren't even affiliated with had started asking for my advice. Even the Association had come knocking on our door on several occasions now.

Eventually, I'd given up taking every little decision seriously. I certainly wasn't going to be responsible for anything that happened because of my advice. That sure as hell wasn't what I'd started the clan for. The only decisions that still kept me up at night were those pertaining to my own party, Grieving Souls.

It was all good. After all, Tino kicked ass. Even her mentor vouched for her speed. If something did happen to go catastrophically wrong, she could always just turn tail and run. If somehow she couldn't, that was on Tino.

Hunters took responsibility for their own lives. When death lay around every corner, it was up to them to prepare for the unexpected. If Tino faced hardships because of the party I'd selected, it'd be her fault for not protesting it enough. No one else was going to take the rap for a mistake like that, so she was the one who'd suffer.

A good hunter had to learn to say no, like I had when I'd sworn off so many treasure vaults early in my career. I hoped this experience would teach Tino a little something about being a bit more assertive. My "wall spaghetti" tactic was actually a well-calculated lick of tough love—a show of my concern for Tino's future. That was all I had to say on the matter.

With a wide stretch, I slumped back into my cushioned chair. "Ugh, I wish I could dump all this hassle and head to a hot spring."

"Perhaps we should plan a clan retreat."

"That'd be pretty awesome. Why not get all the staff together?"

Eva had worked her ass off at a large commercial firm before I'd recruited her as my assistant. Her out-of-the-box thinking was likely down to her background.

A retreat, huh? That was certainly a thought.

The capital was a major city. While crime was relatively low and the roads leading in and out of it were well maintained, monsters and even wandering phantoms from nearby treasure vaults would sometimes pick their prey from

the path. Then there were the bandits. Traveling wasn't normally an easy task. At least my bunch didn't need any bodyguards, because they hunted monsters on a daily basis. That was one small perk of being a hunter.

I couldn't force anyone to come, but I felt like most of them would tag along if I fed them some crap about team-building. The only problem was that if the whole clan were to pack their bags for a trip, the Association or some jackass of nobility would be sure to complain.

Then there were the meatheads of the clan who caused trouble wherever we went. Maybe the most I could handle was a party retreat, rather than packing up the whole damn clan. Though, on second thought, no. My party was on the top of the list of troublesome meatheads. I was stuck here and ready to barf.

Battling my despair, I flipped through the papers Eva and her team had compiled for me, which contained detailed records of Tino's new party members. The Steps kept stacks of documents on treasure vaults and individual hunters unless they were completely green.

Rhuda was very competent. In just half a year, she had climbed the ranks to Level 3, which was astonishingly fast for a solo hunter. Her surviving this far without any major injury was an indication of both talent and luck.

The Great Greg was a veteran. There weren't too many hunters who could work for as long and as steadily as he had.

Then there was Li'l Gilbert, a troublemaker with the chops to back up his attitude. He had belonged to a party from the countryside, but apparently he'd left because he couldn't get along with his partymates. That wasn't uncommon for hunters, though. One wrong move and the Grievors could have been the same. My life would be so much easier if we had.

Looking at the party overall, they were mediocre—talented but nothing exceptional. Every hunter with their sights set on the capital was confident in their abilities. But I knew what true freaks looked like—true freaks who made their way through cutthroat treasure vaults with nothing but their strength and wits, paying no regard to their own safety.

After going through the files, I was reassured of my decision. None of the party members were crazy powerful, but a chore like this would pose them no

issue. If Tino could handle it herself, the four of them would find it a breeze. I might not trust my ability to seek out talent, but I had every faith in the strength of my clan members.

“I wonder if they’ll be all right, though,” Eva said. “That place may be rated Level 3, but there must be something about that quest to make the Association pass the buck to us.”

“Look, they’re fine. If they weren’t, they would have looked for other members in the clan to help them out. Tino’s not a kid anymore.”

Tino had been in the clan since its beginnings. Even though Eva played a different role to us hunters, I could see how watching someone grow up in our clan would make Eva care for them like you would a kid.

I gave a reassuring shrug. Tino could take care of herself. Hunting alone, when no one else could save you from a jam, required a heightened sense of danger. There was nothing to worry about.

Suddenly, the door to my office flew open without so much as a knock.

“Master, help meee!” Tino wailed. “I can’t do it!”

“Aren’t you giving up too soon, Tino?”

Tino’s eyes flew from me to Eva as she darted into the room. From there, she bodied me, digging her head into my stomach.

It had to be an act. She was being way too dramatic for this sort of problem. What a minx. Based on how long it’d been since I’d handed her the chore, she hadn’t even checked out the vault yet. Moreover, hunters weren’t allowed in my office.

Eva stared exasperatedly at Tino. Hadn’t I told her there was nothing to worry about? I was starting to think that mentor of hers was a really bad influence on her.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

“All of it, master. I’m not ready for all this.”

All of it, huh? That didn’t sound good.

Tino propelled me into the lounge, where the rest of them were waiting. I don't know what she'd bribed them with or how she'd pulled it off, but I was pretty impressed she'd got them together so quickly. *Nice one.*

Standing before me were Rhuda Runebeck, the Great Greg, and Li'l Gilbert. I'd named them for no particular reason. Rhuda's name had sprung to mind because she'd mentioned the White Wolf's Den, but the Great Greg and Li'l Gilbert had been random draws. All three of them were pretty capable, their personality flaws notwithstanding.

I hadn't considered how they'd divvy up tasks or work together, but I was a strong believer in strength in numbers. They might not have to go that deep since this was a search and rescue. As long as the party could get along long enough, they'd all make it out alive—not that I'd ever want to join a party like that.

Rhuda was restlessly surveying the lounge, while the other two seemed a little uneasy, and rightfully so. A hunter sitting in the clan house of a clan they didn't belong to would feel like wading into enemy territory.

As Tino led me over by the hand, Rhuda soon spotted me and looked relieved. Come to think of it, she and I had parted without many words once the brawl had broken out. I hadn't had much of a choice, but that didn't mean I couldn't feel a twinge of guilt.

“Hey, Krai—”

“Took you long enough!” Li'l Gilbert barked, cutting Rhuda off and prompting a glare.

The kid was as arrogant as ever, but both his tone and words were dialed down, perhaps due to the volatile environment. Still, the kid sure had some guts to follow Tino here after having his face kicked in.

I turned to the Great Greg, who flashed me a tense grin. “Heh heh. Here you are, in the Steps' HQ. You really are a Griever, huh?”

Okay. In the interest of making my life easier, I set them to a combined threat level E. With Tino by my side and a home field advantage, I could afford to be a little assertive.

“I was really surprised back there,” Rhuda said, giving me an admonishing look. “When you said you’ve been to so many of those events, I thought...”

I hadn’t meant to deceive her. I guess falling in line had been an airhead move. It’s not like I could’ve just parted the line and strode right in, though, especially when it was my fault I’d overslept.

Our conversation must have put Li’l Gilbert at ease somewhat, because he threw me a dirty look. “I expected you Grievors to look stronger. I heard you guys were the strongest party in the capital, but I guess that ain’t true.”

I frowned. “Of course it’s not. Who’s been spreading those rumors?” I asked, but I already knew the answer: my friends. Every one of them was cocky beyond belief. Sure, we were one of the strongest parties for our generation, but the Braves were as young as us, and there were plenty of long-standing powerhouses stronger than us in the capital. By no means were the Grievors the strongest party out there.

Tino squeezed my arm, making me grimace. Modest as they were, two soft peaks were pressing against my arm. She was doing it on purpose, no doubt. Her mentor’s poor influence was showing again. This was getting out of hand.

Tino turned on the waterworks. “They’re so insolent. I can’t go into a treasure vault with people like this, who have no respect for you. You’re our master, master.”

“Sure, whatever that means.” I smiled and nodded, because it didn’t matter. Even if I weren’t a clan master, I would still just be me.

Even so, the Great Greg didn’t share my sentiment. The shock made his thick lips tremble and the color drain from his face. “Wait. ‘Master’? As in *clan* master? Of the Steps?”

“Humbly at your service, your greatness,” I said. No title I had or ever could have would hold a candle to the Great Greg.

“The, um...the Thousand Tricks?” the Great Greg stammered.

Still attached to my arm, Tino eyed him icily. “If you know who my master is, you should kneel before him and beg for his forgiveness.”

Rhuda, meanwhile, was looking confusedly between us.

I wished Tino would stop trying to terrorize her new comrades. I was so ready to barf.

Thousand Tricks: master of stunts and schemes too ingenious for the eye to decipher. That was the title that had been thrust out of pity upon this puppet head of Grieving Souls.

In the treasure-hunting industry, hunters who were exceptionally famous or accomplished were given a title by the Association. Getting one of these titles was like becoming a superstar among hunters. While a title didn't come with any tangible perks, earning one was considered the highest honor a hunter could receive.

Speaking of superstars, Grieving Souls demanded attention like no other party. In addition to its memorably ominous name, each of its members (except for me) was remarkably talented, forever reaching new heights while fearlessly risking their lives to do so.

With them conquering vault after vault like the picture-perfect hunters they were, it was inevitable that my friends earned their own titles. Every member of Grieving Souls (again, except for me) was highly talented in their respective field, which earned titles according to their specialities.

The problem was me: their leader. I never took on any of the traditional roles in a hunting party. All I did was shed every bit of what little ego I had to apologize on my party's behalf everywhere we went while simultaneously calming the tremendous storms that were my friends to keep property damage and casualties to a minimum. None of that had equated to any accolades on my part.

What's this dweeb doing in a horde of freaks? the higher-ups at the Association must have been thinking. The Grievors had produced undeniable results, and it wouldn't make much sense to give every member of the party but its leader a title. People would start to doubt their judgment.

Thus, I had earned my title because I was somehow the leader of a party of

freaks. The public's perception of Grieving Souls because of that was of a mysteriously impressive party led by some hunter called Thousand Tricks. My title, no doubt concocted with plenty of sarcasm on the Association's part, had painted me as an unseen badass that never bothered to fight his own battles—a grandiose mirage I was pretty happy to perpetuate.

Disproving this myth would only lead to people realizing how weak I truly was, making me a walking target. I couldn't have that. Besides, having my abilities grossly exaggerated came with its perks.

Pale-faced and trembling, the Great Greg stared at me. Sometimes, people who discovered my title still saw me as weak enough to trample over, but this guy clearly knew better. "No way. They said you're young, but not *this* young."

"That doesn't really matter. Um..."

At that moment, it hit me that I didn't know what I was supposed to do. How much had Tino told them? Needing help with "all of it" didn't exactly narrow down the problem.

I looked down at Tino, who was giving me puppy-dog eyes. Those told me everything I needed to know. At the very least, I was pretty good at reading a room. No doubt she wanted a few words from me to get this rowdy bunch on the same page.

Useless as I was, my position of power gave my words considerable weight. I gave Tino a little nod, and her eyes lit up. *Don't you worry about a thing, little Tino.*

"Ahem. I gathered you all here today to ask for your assistance with a job I gave Tino."

For some reason, Tino's face contorted. She sure was a worrywart. The request was a sudden one, but the fact that all three of them had followed Tino here meant we had a shot at them agreeing. A word from me should be enough to get them working as a team.

Rhuda had wanted to take on the White Wolf's Den from the get-go, and the Great Greg knew a thing or two about hunters. I felt that he and I shared a philosophy: don't bare your teeth at the bigger beast. We should talk it out over

a drink sometime.

Speaking of bared teeth, the last of the newly recruited trio was snarling in my direction. “You? You’re Thousand Tricks, the strongest hunter in the capital?! Is this a joke?! You look like you haven’t trained a day in your life!”

“The strongest? Me?”

Seriously, who’s been spreading this stuff? I’m the one who has to foot the bill every time.

As I tried to deny the accusation, Tino stepped out in front of me. “Poor little idiot. He doesn’t understand my master’s strength. It’s like he’s wasted ninety percent of his life.”

“You’re not making any sense, Tino. Shut up a minute, will ya?”

“Master, I can’t team up with him. People who talk big but can’t back it up are the worst.”

That would include me, Tino.

Li’l Gilbert sure had a point, though, when he said I looked like I hadn’t been training, because I hadn’t. If he and I squared off in a fair fight with equal equipment, he’d smoke me.

The Great Greg held back the kid from practically charging me. “You dumbass! Learn to pick your fights! You don’t go waving your fists at the youngest hunter ever to make it to Level 8, even before Ark Rodin!”

“Leggo of me, old man!” Li’l Gilbert roared. “Dammit! There’s no way he’s stronger than me!”

If I reached out my hand, he probably would have snapped at it. I’ve said it before, but the kid sure had some guts. If I were in his shoes, I would have already been groveling on the ground for forgiveness. In fact, his fighting spirit and temper were on par with a first-rate hunter.

I turned to Rhuda. “Will you help us out?”

“I mean, it’s a perfect opportunity for me. Are you really Level 8?” she asked incredulously.

I decided to pull back the reins before things got out of hand. Levels assigned by the Association were far from straightforward indications of strength; they were decided through multifaceted calculations.

“The numbers racked up on their own. When you’re a party leader or clan master, you earn points based on the accomplishments of other members in your organization. With Steps being as large as it is, it didn’t take long to earn the points to level up.”

“Your points are off the chart in my book, master!”

Rhuda looked half-convinced.

Earning points that way wasn’t a loophole, by the way. Thanks to the Association encouraging growth in the hunting community, all high-level hunters took on responsibilities as party leaders, clan masters, or mentors. How else could I have earned a higher level than Ark, who’s always out on the front lines?

Li’l Gilbert boiled with rage. “You heard him! He cheated his way to Level 8! You’re not a top hunter! You can’t be!”

Guts or no guts, this kid was starting to get on my nerves. I sighed and looked down at him. “Level 8 isn’t the top, you know? Well, whatever. I don’t care if you believe me or not.”

I was used to being looked down on. I mean, sure. I looked weak, and I *was* weak compared to the freaks in the Steps. I was only clan master because no one else wanted to do it. If someone were willing to take my place, I’d step down in a heartbeat. I’d feel bad for Tino, but she could afford to lose one out of the three.

“Forget it, Li’l Gilbert. How about you, your greatness? Will you help us?”

“What?” Li’l Gilbert’s eyes grew wide as Tino pumped her fist for some reason.

“Oh, me? I, uh... Of course I’ll help,” the Great Greg muttered.

I know I’d told Tino to call them all here, but I wasn’t going to force Li’l Gilbert to join a party he didn’t want to join, much less beg him to do so. My ego aside,

this was my clan's lounge. None of my members would be happy to see their master beg for anything. Why should I risk the morale of the entire clan for a chance of adding this piece of crap to Tino's party? If Li'l Gilbert were as strong as Ark, I might have considered it, but he was a Level 4 combatant. We had plenty of those in the clan already.

"Hey, you sure about this?! I'm not gonna help you, you know?!"

"That breaks my heart. But oh well. Tino, if you don't think the three of you can handle it, take someone else from the Steps."

A few of them would be day-drinking in the bar next door, no doubt.

Seeing an opportunity for more pleading, Tino turned the biggest puppy-dog eyes on me she could muster. "Please, please, come with me, master."

"Hell no."

Why would I go? A Level 3 treasure vault might have been a walk in the park for a freak, but it was still deadly to the likes of me. As much as I was willing to admit Tino's strength, she wasn't up to snuff as a bodyguard.

Even though I'd answered her clearly enough, Tino kept her teary eyes trained on me. She had fawned on me plenty of times before, and I had always taken it in my stride as the cool-older-brother figure in her life. Still, this was getting to be a bit too much.

As I grabbed her by the head and started to peel her off of me, Li'l Gilbert began yelling to force our attention back to him. "I challenge you!" he yelled.

Was he out of his mind? Even Tino, with my hand still on her head, blinked in confusion.

As if he couldn't bear the weight of our stares, he shouted again. "I challenge you, Thousand Tricks!" His outstretched finger pointed at my chin. "If I lose, I'll join the party!"

"Huh?"

What did you say to me, you little— I swallowed my words. This was a whole new level of being looked down on. Not to borrow Tino's words, but he had no idea what he was up against.

I was a certified Level 8 hunter. Sure, I was a pathetic weakling, but the disparity in strength between the *average* Level 8 hunter and Level 4 hunter was insurmountable. Even the Level 7 Ark would see Gilbert as nothing more than a speck of dust.

Most importantly, though, why would I, Thousand Tricks, ever get into a fight I had no guarantee of winning just to convince a little snot bubble to join a party? I'd weaseled my way out of every conflict that'd come my way. If this kid wanted to fight me, he'd have to go through every single member of the Steps. Even the Great Greg was astonished at the kid's recklessness.

Li'l Gilbert continued his tantrum, gripping the hilt of his greatsword and raising it above his head. "I won't follow anyone who's weaker than me!" he grandly declared.

"Then you'll have to beat Tino, won't you?"

"What?"

I mean, she *was* the leader of their party.

Tino detached herself from my arm and shot daggers at the baffled Gilbert. "You really know how to deflect, master. Very well. I, Tino Shade, shall smite thee in dear Lizzy's name for your blasphemy against our master."

"Look at me, master! Lizzy really stretched me out. You can put me in any position you like."

"Sure. Whatever that means, Tino, I'm sure it's great."

Tino was doing a split, her legs spread 180 degrees, her torso flat on the ground. Her dark hair, cropped to her shoulders, was spread in a midnight-black puddle on the floor around her.

Flexibility was a necessity for any hunter, especially for a Thief. Liz could fold herself up like an invertebrate and fit into an unbelievably tiny suitcase.

Tino was completely calm in the face of her skirmish. That training of hers must have been paying off. She was the only apprentice of Liz Smart, the Thief of Grieving Souls, but she had already grown stronger than the average hunter.

Liz's curriculum was mostly self-concocted. I'd heard that there were two types of geniuses in the world: thinkers and doers. Liz, ever the doer, had taken all the training she had personally experienced, cranked up the severity, and inflicted it all on Tino.

Having survived the kind of training that implied murderous intent on her mentor's part, Tino never froze in the face of a challenge. That, of course, was much unlike me, who was always on the verge of barfing my guts out. Our cute little mascot was a freak in her own right.

The First Steps clan house contained several underground floors that housed training facilities. To test Li'l Gilbert's mettle, I had booked the first basement level: an open space of ten thousand square meters.

The Steps had all sorts of facilities dedicated to practicing specific skills, but this floor in particular was designed for practice matches. The ceiling was five meters high, roughly twice the height of the average ceiling, to allow for enough elbow room for fighters to maneuver on every level. The floor was as hard as the ground itself, so even the toughest of hunters would take some damage if they were to be knocked flat against it.

Eyes blazing, Li'l Gilbert stared at Tino and me. Tino lying flat on her back, her thighs exposed, and the nape of her neck peeking through her hair made for a somewhat seductive sight, but the boy before her saw nothing but an enemy. He really believed he was going to win.

Oh, to be young again... The kid kind of reminded me of Luke back in the day.

"You think this is a game?!" Li'l Gilbert snarled.

"She's Level 4, just so you know."

Li'l Gilbert's eyes widened. Apparently, he hadn't expected her to be the same level as him. Though Tino had a bit of an aloof air about her (as long as she kept quiet), she was small—even smaller than Li'l Gilbert, who was small for a guy.

Still, he couldn't afford to underestimate Tino. While Swordsmen like Li'l Gilbert would suffer from a small stature and lack of muscle, the same couldn't be said for Thieves. For them, being light on their feet was an important

weapon.

After completing a series of stretches, Tino stood up and faced off against Li'l Gilbert. "I'm a speck of dust compared to my master."

"Who do you think I am, Tino?"

She was overselling me like I was going out of sale.

Tino undid her belt and tossed it aside, her dagger and item pouch still attached to it. By the looks of things, she was going in with her bare hands.

She shrugged as Li'l Gilbert glared harder. "I'll go easy on you, so you don't end up dead."

"You what?!" Gilbert looked like he might pop a vein. Tino was doing a spectacular job of triggering the kid.

Rhuda ran over to me and asked in a nervous whisper, "Is she gonna be okay?"

"Uh, probably."

Although Tino and Gilbert were at the same level, I knew just how talented Tino was. She was only at Level 4 because she was going at it solo; with the right party, she could have been Level 5 already. After all, she was training under the watchful eye of one of my friends, a certified freak in the holy land of hunting.

The problem was that Swordsmen were typically unparalleled when it came to close combat. The Association certainly didn't hand out Levels on a whim. Despite his flaws, something about Li'l Gilbert warranted a Level 4 assessment; we'd be fools to underestimate him.

Besides, that greatsword of his was a Relic. Relics represented a myriad of potential, which could more than make up for a difference in levels. From what I saw during the recruitment drive, his sword didn't possess any unusual powers, but any Relic could make or break a fight.

Tino didn't have a Relic at her disposal—besides the Shooting Ring I gave her, which was barely usable in combat—so he was one up against her. However, she had enough experience in fights like these to know what to look out for. In

my eyes, they were both freaks.

Meanwhile, Gilbert finally snapped. He tossed his greatsword aside and cracked his knuckles. “Heh! I don’t need a weapon to take on an unarmed girl!”

So Gilbert, a Swordsman, had tossed aside his sword—along with his last brain cell, apparently.

Tino had made a show of tossing her dagger aside to “go easy” on him, but she actually fought best hand to hand. Well, foot to foot, since she favored kicks.

This fight had already begun before the bell. There’s no such thing as cowardice on the battlefield. Even if her opponent had the upper hand, Tino seemed set on beating the kid to a pulp.

The pair squared off about five meters apart.

“I’m gonna get ice cream with you, master!” Tino sang, dancing to and fro.

“I never promised you that,” I muttered.

Li’l Gilbert was grinding his teeth. Anyone would be pissed off by Tino’s display. Then it occurred to me that, while I most certainly had not promised Tino any ice cream, I was always asking for favors without offering anything in return. I wouldn’t mind hanging out with her once in a while, especially since she’d make a decent bodyguard.

“All right, sure. We can go once you finish the quest.”

“Really?!”

In that instant, Tino’s graceful dance became a sharp leap, accelerating to top speed in a split second. Her eyes changed from those of an innocent girl to those of a ferocious predator. It was a magnificent maneuver, even when viewed from the safe distance where I was standing.

Swordsmen excelled in brute force, while Thieves emphasized dexterity. A Thief’s main role in a treasure vault was to pick locks and scope for enemies, but that didn’t mean they weren’t capable fighters. They were shadowy warriors who killed silently, in the blink of an eye.

The five meters between the two fighters vanished in an instant. By the time

Gilbert even registered that she'd moved, Tino's hand was flying straight for his neck. The move seemed a little scummy on Tino's part, since I hadn't even called for the fight to start.

Gilbert, however, wasn't completely caught off guard, as he took a quick step back to avoid the attack. As if all her movements were part of one fluid strike, Tino launched her knee into Gilbert's stomach, knocking the boy back some distance.

It was a massacre. Tino's attacks weren't as powerful as those of a Swordsman, but her slender arms possessed enough of a threat against the armorless Gilbert. Rhuda and the Great Greg were stunned into silence by the lightning-fast assault.

Tino flashed me a small smile without so much as a glance at Gilbert. "Did you see, master? I totally smote him."

"This isn't over yet..."

Gilbert slowly picked himself up, having slid several meters across the ground. He coughed and wavered for a moment, but he was far from immobilized. He was tough.

A human body constantly seeped in mana material became strong enough to go toe to toe against a wild beast. Their very blood, flesh, and bones were inhuman. Gilbert's toughness was testimony that the kid was a warrior.

Tino scoffed at Li'l Gilbert's murderous glowering, brushing her hair aside. "I'm sure you realized, but I went easy on you. I could have snapped your neck. Now that you've learned your lesson, you should stop talking back to my master. Worship him as your god; face the clan house and pray three times a day; and bring me offerings at regular intervals. I'll be sure to deliver them for you."

Without a word, Gilbert charged forward with a speed befitting of a Level 4 hunter. I took a quick step away from the soon-to-be crash site.

That charge was a pretty reckless move, though. The boy didn't seem well versed when it came to fighting other hunters. This might even have been his first time facing off against a Thief.

Tino spun around and evaded the charge. As he tried to grab her arm and catch her by surprise, she parried his hand with hers before striking Gilbert's temple with the heel of her palm. A dull thud rang out as a result of the impact.

The supposedly strong Gilbert staggered a few steps then toppled to the floor. He tried desperately to clamor to his feet, but he couldn't seem to focus his eyes. His brain had been thoroughly rattled. Perhaps I should have applauded him for trying to move in that state. I would have barfed for sure.

Tino dusted off her hands and said proudly, "Take a look at that, master! It's all thanks to you I've grown so much."

She should have been telling that to Liz, rather than me. It's not like I had anything to do with Tino's training.

The Great Greg's lips were trembling. No doubt the man was stunned by how soon the battle had ended. "She's strong, overpowering a Swordsman head-on, even if the kid was unarmed. More than anything, she knows how to fight. Are you sure she's a teenager? Is this what it takes to join the Steps?"

Rhuda, too, was muttering to herself. "I've never even tried unarmed combat. I wonder if she'd teach me."

An unarmed Swordsman wasn't a Swordsman at all. There was really no need for this.

"This isn't...over... I can...still fight!" Li'l Gilbert staggered to his feet. He didn't have any open wounds or anything, but his equilibrium was shot, and his eyes were still hazy.

Li'l Gilbert had lost as soon as he'd fallen for Tino's trap and ditched his sword. Miracles weren't exactly a thing. The kid had no shot, so I had to wonder if it were his pride as a hunter forcing him to his feet.

Back when I'd still burned with a passion for treasure hunting, had I had that kind of guts? His ability to get back on his feet after being completely obliterated was a talent in and of itself. When I'd teased him with a recommendation to join the Braves, I hadn't meant anything by it, but it seemed that Li'l Gilbert had what it took to be a hunter, after all.

Recklessness was a valuable trait that couldn't be taught. While hunters had

to watch their backs to stay alive, some things couldn't be gained by playing it cautious.

Tino was looking like I just asked her to watch paint dry, so I clapped my hands in encouragement. "Give him a shot, Tino. I never said how the match would be decided. Beat him up until there's no hard feelings. It'll be a good lesson."

They'd be good friends in no time once they traded a few punches, right?

Gilbert Bush was talented. Ever since he'd been old enough to take up a sword, he'd been instructed to build his strength.

Hard work had never betrayed him. The years he spent with a sword in his hand, sometimes learning from mentors, sometimes through trial and error, made him increasingly stronger. By the time he was ten years old, no child or adult in his village came close in terms of ability.

Talents came in many forms, but among them were exceptional rates of mana material absorption and capacity that could be absorbed. The faster a person could absorb the stuff, the stronger they grew in a shorter time. The greater their capacity, the more strength they could obtain.

Gilbert possessed both of these talents; his absorption speed and capacity far exceeded those of the average person—so much so that, even living in his village with little mana material in the air, he had grown stronger than anyone else. It was only natural that Gilbert Bush would walk the path of a hunter.

Gilbert knew that the quickest way to get his hands on everything he wanted was to take on treasure vaults, mowing down phantoms and monsters. Exploring mana material-filled vaults also gave him a caliber of strength unobtainable in his village.

As soon as he turned fifteen, Gilbert packed his bags, defying the protests of his friends and family to move by himself to the capital. He had never been to the capital before, and he was elated to discover a grand city full of life. He ate food he'd never eaten in his self-sustained village and admired the countless buildings lining the streets. Each street, wide enough for several carriages to

ride side by side, was packed with so many people, a stranger might think there was a festival going on. Most impressively, though, were the countless people dressed in the garb of treasure hunters, which had been a rare sight back in his village.

Gilbert's rapid progress showed no sign of stopping even after he registered with the Explorer's Association and began taking on treasure vaults. Unlike most other rookies, Gilbert had had plenty of training prior to starting his career, and his talent was a cut above the rest. Above all, he had so much courage, the Association scolded him for his recklessness, but he had the luck to make up for it.

His talent truly began to blossom once he formed a party with four other rookies. Together, they took on treasure vaults of increasingly higher difficulty. The greatsword he had come across in his very first vault allowed him to easily take down phantoms with ease and stave off hordes of monsters.

In the golden age of treasure hunting, Gilbert was considered part of the second generation. He wasn't thrilled by the distinction, but he also knew that plenty of hunters were beyond human understanding. Some old-timers, especially, had become unbelievably strong through their countless explorations of treasure vaults and years of intaking mana material.

By then, Gilbert had come face-to-face with plenty of hunters he didn't stand a chance against, but he had come to accept that fact. He had time, and with time, he would one day reach the same heights. He was sure of it. Gilbert's future gleamed like a golden stairway to glory.

That future had only begun to darken a few weeks ago.

"I'm finally all warmed up. I'll make easy work of this quest now, you'll see! Your wisdom is awe-inspiring, master," a carefree voice said from above.

Gilbert forced his battered and bruised body into motion, glowering at Tino, who was looking icily down at him as if he were an insect.

Tino was strong. Terribly strong, even though she was a similar age to him. Each one of her blows came hard and fast. None of Gilbert's reckless attacks,

each of them powerful enough to damage a phantom, had so much as scratched Tino, while he hadn't managed to dodge or parry a single attack of hers.

This girl was nothing like the thugs who'd picked fights with him before now, or the phantoms he had faced in vaults. Most notably, Tino's moves were tailored to human combat. Phantoms sure as hell didn't try to concuss their opponent or fend off attacks with their palms. To make matters worse, she'd done all of that with ease.

Gilbert had been told that the Steps attracted many talented young hunters, but he hadn't expected anything like this. While the first hit had been unexpected, he hadn't underestimated her after that. Simply put, she was far stronger than him—so much so that he could hardly believe they'd been assigned the same level.

Not having his sword on him was no excuse. He had chosen of his own volition to fight empty-handed, because she had no weapons either. But he had no intention of making excuses; his goal lied far beyond the horizon.

"Are you still conscious?" Tino asked.

Gilbert tried to stand, but he didn't have the strength. He couldn't feel his fingers. He couldn't move his limbs. Even if he could stand, he certainly couldn't move the way he wanted to.

Enhanced by mana material, Gilbert's body was durable enough to survive a few bullets. He'd been severely wounded plenty of times during hunts and had even faced mortal danger. This, however, was the first time he had been beaten so badly by an unarmed human being.

"Gah! Dammit!"

"You can use that sword if you want," Tino said lazily. Gilbert's main weapon was still lying in the corner of his eye, where he had tossed it before the match.

The Purgatorial Sword was a Relic Gilbert had acquired in a Level 1 treasure vault called the Veteran's Parade Ground. The sword had supported Gilbert's career from the ground up, slicing through countless monsters and phantoms along the way.

Obtaining the Relic after moving to the capital with hardly any money in his pocket was Gilbert's luckiest break in life. Weapon Relics were powerful in and of themselves, and for Gilbert, who wasn't very technical, a greatsword was the perfect weapon. Wielding the sword he had shared so many ups and downs with would certainly feel more reassuring, but Gilbert bit back the thought.

Instead, he glared at the crimson-tinted blade. "Never!" he bellowed, still flat on the ground.

He was miserable. He knew that the Purgatorial Sword was a powerful weapon. Back when he'd first acquired it, he had had it assessed at the Association, whose rep had been pretty surprised—it was far too rare of a Relic to have been obtained in a Level 1 treasure vault.

That was precisely why Gilbert couldn't reach for the sword. If he did, especially against an opponent without a weapon, he felt he would be crediting all of his accomplishments to that sword.

Tino didn't attack further. After some time and some rest, Gilbert rose to his feet again.

Tino frowned. "Your pride is stupid."

Gilbert saw no opening in her stance. She hadn't broken a sweat, let alone shown any fatigue, yet even standing before a far inferior opponent, she didn't let her guard down for a second. Gilbert knew that if she really wanted him dead, he would have been mincemeat already. While he prided himself in his physical durability, Tino had the stuff to break him.

Gilbert stooped low, panting through the pain. Hollering would be a waste of strength, so he eyed her down, beast-like. Was there an opening? What should he do? Tino looked frail—frailer than him, anyway. Just one hit should be enough. One heavy hit...

But Gilbert's hit wouldn't land, even if he tried. After all, she had seen through every one of his earlier attacks.

As Gilbert racked his brain for the slightest path to victory, Thousand Tricks' voice entered his ears. The guy spoke in the same nonchalant tone as he'd used before the match. The other three spectators, who'd been pushed to the back

of his mind, came back into focus.

“Why don’t you give it a rest? You wanted confirmation that Tino’s stronger than you, and I think you’ve had enough of it.” When Gilbert didn’t respond, he continued. “You left your last party, didn’t you?”

Gilbert choked on his breath and stared at Thousand Tricks. His mouth bore traces of a smile as he stood there, as intimidating as ever: an ordinary man with black hair, dark eyes, and a plain appearance, who showed no indication of having accumulated mana material. He didn’t even wear the Steps or Grievors logo that he was supposed to wear. The fact that he didn’t even look like a member made him even more unnerving.

Gilbert had indeed left his party. He had had to leave the first party he had joined when he’d first come to the capital—a party he’d ventured with for nearly half a year. His partymates just hadn’t been able to keep up.

Thousand Tricks maintained his enigmatic smile, making Gilbert’s hair stand on end. Even Gilbert, in his short time in the capital, had heard of this man—one of the best hunters who called the capital home and the leader of Grieving Souls, a party entirely composed of hunters with titles, the penultimate indication of a hunter’s prowess.

“How did you...?” Gilbert muttered.

“I’ve been there. You and your party didn’t match up. I get it. The Grievors just aren’t the type to leave a man behind.”

For a moment, Gilbert struggled to understand, and then the realization hit. Titles were reserved for the best of the best—hunters with exceptional talent, who had breezed through countless vaults. They were an honor far out of Gilbert’s current reach, and yet Thousand Tricks who led those Grievors, whose talent was beyond compare, thought of them as nothing more than...

“I think joining this party would be a good experience for you. I’m sure you have your reservations and the like, but I’d like to see you youngsters getting along.”

Thousand Tricks had plenty of openings Gilbert could have gone for. Heck, his body looked weaker than Tino’s. The dude looked so weak, Gilbert had pegged

him for an utter wimp. Now, that same perception frightened him. Even now, after Gilbert had learned of his status and abnormal nature, the man still looked as weak as he had before.

Before Gilbert knew what was happening, his hands and legs were quaking. His face was twitching and his lungs tightening. The inside of his mouth dried up as his eyes remained glued to the clan master.

Treasure vaults were packed to the brim with monsters: those who ate humans, those who pretended to be human, those with intelligence, those with special abilities, those who employed brute strength, and even those who tried to manipulate hunters by speaking to them. And yet Gilbert understood as little of the man before him as he did of phantoms.

Thousand Tricks... He had heard the name plenty of times but had not heard a word about what kind of hunter he was.

The clan master approached the Purgatorial Sword and tapped the blade with his foot. Instantly, crimson flames whirled out of the broad blade, roaring into a spiraling inferno.

Gilbert couldn't comprehend what he was seeing. Greg and Rhuda watched in awe.



Completely unfazed, Thousand Tricks spoke from within the spiraling flames. “An elemental buff and an expansion of attack range, huh? It’s a simple sword, but a good one. Take good care of it.” Fire had enveloped his arm like gauntlets, and his eyes were flickering red.

“Now way! You can’t wield it! The Purgatorial Sword is a Relic! A *Relic!*”

Relics were powerful items that required delicate manipulation. The more powerful a Relic was, the more training was required to utilize even a fraction of its power.

The flames writhed through the air, materializing into a pair of scorching wings on Thousand Tricks’ back. Gilbert forgot all the anguish, all his regret, pride, and pain, and bellowed, “You’re not even touching the hilt! How is that even possible?!”

Even the Purgatorial Sword’s owner had only recently managed to elevate it from a well-made but ordinary sword. Even then, Gilbert had only managed to coat the blade in flames. It wasn’t that controlling a Relic was difficult. He simply had no idea how to do so. Relics didn’t come with labeled buttons and switches, nor did they come with a manual. Learning how to operate a Relic wasn’t something talent could solve.

Since the Relic belonged to Gilbert, he understood the impossibility of the feat he was witnessing.

Thousand Tricks grinned within the veil of flames, his black hair reflecting its ominous glow. It couldn’t be. This man wasn’t like Tino, who was simply further ahead in her training. Thousand Tricks didn’t so much as stand on the same path as Gilbert was climbing. He was an unknown.

Upon witnessing this unimaginable sight, Gilbert heard his own voice quiver in terror like it was foreign to him. “Freak.”

Tino continued to gaze down at Gilbert, unfazed.

The shadow of Thousand Tricks, projected by the roaring flames, looked like a spirit wailing in grief.

Chapter Three: The White Wolf's Den

Through the expansive forest northwest of Zebrudia was a thin, unbeaten track that ran like a crack between the trees. At the very end of that track was the treasure vault in question: the White Wolf's Den.

The vault had once been the territory of a large pack of monsters—the Silver Moons, wolves with coats that shone like the moon and repelled all kinds of magic attacks; powerful legs to weave through the woods; and piercing fangs to crunch through the body and armor of a well-built hunter. These beasts were intelligent enough to cast minor spells and hunt down stronger monsters by coordinating as a pack, earning them a reputation as reapers of the forest.

Although Silver Moons were tough to take on, they had two key weaknesses: they grew to no more than a meter in length, and their entrancing moonglow fur—their namesake—made them popular targets. Every part of a Silver Moon—their bones, their fangs, their fur—was among the most valuable monster parts on the market—enough so for many a hunter to run the risks of venturing into the vault to reap the rewards. Thus, many Silver Moons fell prey to the greed of treasure hunters. Even a species of monster with intelligence, strength, and numbers was no match for hunters who outclassed them in each of those aspects.

Monsters were of flesh and blood. No matter how powerful they were, they couldn't spontaneously materialize like the phantoms that roamed the vault. In fact, they were close to becoming wiped out entirely. As their numbers decreased in inverse proportion to the capital's boom in population, their increasingly scarce pelts became more valuable. Silver Moons, which had once been the terrors of the woods, were now nothing more than a big, fat payday for any hunter lucky enough to cross one's path. By the time the capital had become known as the holy land of treasure hunting, the Silver Moons had disappeared, leaving the remnants of their once populous pack all over their extensive den.

The den was supposedly empty, but about a decade ago, rumors had emerged of a blood-soaked wolf appearing there.

“Sheesh! It’s gotta be restless spirits. They give me the heebie-jeebies.” I shuddered, chucking the file aside. Just thinking about it made me wanna barf.

I was a wimp to begin with, but the other Grievors knew that in haunted vaults like these, I was even more of a wimp. I wasn’t the type to test my mettle telling ghost stories around a campfire. Heck, there was no mettle to test.

Eva chuckled at my expense. “There’s no need to quake so hard.”

“It just had to be a vault that can’t let go of the past. Those things practically *scream* baggage.”

Treasure vaults, which materialized where there was an abundance of mana material, presented in one of three forms: those completely unrelated to their location, those heavily influenced by their environment, or those that reflected historical events that had taken place there. Nations around the world were carrying out extensive research to identify patterns of treasure vault materialization, but they had yet to yield conclusive results. In any case, the White Wolf’s Den looked to be a combination of the second and third variety.

A great crimson wolf had appeared out of nowhere, prowling the desolate den of its forebears eradicated by mankind. It’s not that I had any sympathy for the Silver Moons or anything, but a tale like that sure crept me out.

“According to the testimony of a hunter who fought Silver Moons, this wolf is far stronger than those of the past,” Eva explained.

I forced a chuckle. “And you can’t even nab a pelt. No, thank you.”

Phantoms were tangible apparitions that materialized the same way treasure vaults did. Strength aside, they bore certain characteristics that distinguished them from monsters. For one, phantoms didn’t leave a carcass behind. When destroyed, they reverted to mana material, immediately dissipating into the air, as if they really had been an illusion. Very rarely, a particularly well-manifested body part would be left behind, but stripping them of their pelts wasn’t really an option.

If hunters were going for day trips in a place like that and not making it back, no way in hell was that my problem.

Eva was flipping through the file she had requested, looking contemplative rather than fearful. Perhaps she considered herself worlds away from the front lines. “Looking at this,” she said, “the vault must have earned a Level 3 for the strength of its phantoms rather than the difficulty of its layout or traps.”

“Interesting. Well, I’m sure they’ll be fine. It’s Tino we’re talking about.”

A treasure vault’s level was determined by its difficulty in all aspects, as well as the percentage of hunters who made it out of it alive. Vaults easier to navigate typically spawned stronger monsters and phantoms, and vice versa. Most hunters had a preference as to which they’d rather take on.

Seeing as how Li’l Gilbert and Tino were absolute muscleheads, I wasn’t too worried. They could take care of a powerful phantom or two. In fact, Tino seemed to have moved one foot into freakdom since the last time I’d seen her fight. I supposed that was inevitable, but now there was no turning back for her.

“I’m surprised Gilbert agreed to join,” Eva said.

“I dunno. He probably did some self-reflection while Tino was beating him to a pulp. Or maybe when I asked him about his last party after that tip you gave me.”

Eva Renfied was an incredible person. While she didn’t have any experience as a hunter, her managerial skills were top-notch. Since she still kept in touch with the trading company she used to work for, she could handle everything from purchasing supplies for the clan to gathering intel using her connections, and she even handled the occasional inspections from the higher-ups of the empire. Researching Tino’s three new party members had been no sweat for someone like her.

Really, I should have been kissing the ground she walked on, just like I should have been doing around Ark. If there hadn’t been a regulation stipulating that a clan master had to be a Level 5 or higher hunter, she would have long been the master of the Steps, leaving me to peacefully retire.

Recalling my conversation with Gilbert, I couldn't help but laugh. "You should have seen the look on his face. I guess there is such a thing as having too much talent."

Gilbert had been blowing through treasure vaults like they were going out of style, to a point where the rest of his party couldn't keep up. It was a story all too common in this industry, especially because disparities in talent became all the more pronounced on the battlefield. What happened with my party was just one other example, and I'd witnessed plenty of other parties go through the same thing.

That said, there were two differences between the Grievors and Gilbert's party: Gilbert had been the only party member with extraordinary talent, and he had chosen to leave the party over working out their differences. That made Gilbert and I exact opposites.

I suspected that pride had prevented Gilbert from leaving his party, more than anything else. He almost seemed too reckless, like he wanted to convince himself there was no turning back. He wouldn't be the first young prodigy to break up a party, and he wouldn't be the last. A situation like mine was much rarer to come by.

Of course, the real victims here were Li'l Gilbert's party members, who had been dragged through vault after vault they were underqualified for, only to explode into a row and lose a member.

"Did you knock some sense into him?" Eva asked.

"Nope. I just said whatever came to mind. I probably knocked him down a peg, but I'm in no place to make any hunter see sense."

My clan was chock full of hunters far worse than Li'l Gilbert, like Tino with the creepy worship of me and Liz who must have whispered that nonsense into her student's ear. Who was I to lecture anyone about how to run their clan? I hated it when clan members came to me seeking advice about their interpersonal issues—*that's not on me. Do what you want and leave me out of it!*

"If you say so," Eva said, maintaining her perfect posture.

As excellent as Eva was at her job, I had a feeling that she didn't always see

things as they were—not that I would ever dare complain to the woman who was single-handedly holding up the clan.

I decided to change the subject before things got exhausting. “Li’l Gilbert’s Relic is actually pretty cool, you know?”

“The Purgatorial Sword, was it?”

I smiled, recalling the greatsword forged in the shape of a scorching flame.

I loved Relics. There was no denying their allure. In fact, they were the only thing that filled me with vigor. It was no wonder hunters far and wide risked their lives to pursue them.

Best of all, anyone could use them. Absolutely anyone, regardless of talent or skill, could employ these Relics to wield miraculous powers. Need I say more? I didn’t use Relics all that often myself, but that didn’t mean they weren’t awesome.

“That’s the one. Say, do you think he’d sell it to me? It grants fire affinity and extends attack range, but maybe it has other effects I could look into.”

I doubted he’d sell it to me, though. Relics took a long time to get used to before a wielder could unleash their potential. Once a hunter grew accustomed to their Relic, they were never too eager to let it out of their hands.

As I continued gushing about the wonderful qualities just one touch had revealed from the Purgatorial Sword, I noticed the reprimanding look in Eva’s eyes. I must have gotten carried away again, so I made an effort to tone it down and play it cool.

“We are trying to cut wasteful spending, Krai.”

“How would that be wasteful?”

“Elemental enhancement and range expansion? You have plenty of Relics like that already.”

Plenty? As if. Each Relic was a one-of-a-kind object, the product of a unique natural phenomenon, with its own distinct differences and quirks.

I almost retorted as much, when I caught Eva’s glare. Remembering my place, I mously answered, “Well, I guess those *are* common characteristics of weapon

Relics.”

A number of stores in the capital sold Relics. Anyone in the city could get their hands on one with those specs, as long as they didn’t care about effectiveness or ease of use. Relics that were both powerful and easy to wield were much harder to come by. The Purgatorial Sword was much more forthright and easy to handle than any of the seven other similar Relics I’d laid my hands on so far. That explained how Li’l Gilbert had, in such a short period of time, figured out how to use it.

I doubted Eva would take that for an answer, though. Maybe she’d found out about me occasionally dipping my fingers in the clan account and using the dough to buy Relics for myself (always replenishing the funds at a later date, of course). I eyed her up, but her all-seeing pale-purple eyes gave nothing away of her thoughts.

Running out of options, I forced a half-hearted smile and resorted to bribery. “A-Anyway, do you wanna, uh, go get something sweet?” Sugar was the ticket to sweetening people up.

Eva’s eyelids twitched. “You’re only asking because you want some, aren’t you?”

“Nuh-uh. That’s totally untrue.”

When had Eva found out I had a sweet tooth? I kept that part of myself on a need-to-know basis, to maintain my badass image. I really couldn’t be too careful around her.

The very temporary party members were sitting together at the table that Tino usually occupied alone. Each of them were looking at her, waiting for direction. She would have much preferred to take on the quest alone, but she was now stuck with this band of misfits. When her master had suggested they’d do just fine without Gilbert, she’d allowed herself a glimpse of hope. Now she realized that everything had gone according to her master’s plan.

The quest she’d been given was a search and rescue, which required the utmost urgency. There was no time to make thorough preparations.

Tino looked from member to member of her party, preparing to give her first official words as their leader. “First, I need to write a will.”

“What?! Wait a minute!” Rhuda cried, shooting up and slamming her hands down.

Tino should just about be there by now, huh? Oh, shoot.

There I was, lazily polishing my Hounding Chain, when I suddenly remembered it was out of mana.

Relics were powerful tools, but their effects weren’t produced unconditionally. They were powered by mana, the same energy source that Magi used to cast magic. The more powerful a Relic, the more mana it required to function. This was one of the reasons hunters didn’t lug around a ton of Relics.

Infusing Relics with mana was easy enough, since mana flowed within every living creature. However, the reservoir of that mana varied greatly from subject to subject. Even Magi, who held more mana than most life-forms, could only charge a few Relics before their mana would run out.

Sadly, I possessed less mana than the average person, so I had my friends or clan members charge up my Relics for me. The Association recommended that hunters only carry as many Relics as they could charge on their own, but what choice did I have? My piddly amount of mana was one of the reasons I’d tossed in the towel with frontline hunting. If only there were *one* thing I was good at.

Mana wasn’t a free resource either. I usually had my Relics charged by Lucia, the Griever’s Magus, but she wasn’t around. I’d have to figure something else out for the time being.

I rolled up my Hounding Chain and set off for the lounge.

Warm rays from the setting sun streamed through the floor-length windows, basking the lounge in amber. Several of the tables there were populated by Steps members I recognized, apparently having returned from their day’s work. I headed straight for one of the groups, to butt in on their merry conversation.

Expendng mana was exhausting, so much so that mages could barely move when their mana ran empty. Usually, I'd have to ask a skilled mage for my recharges, but I just needed the chain charged today.

The leader of the party, a man with wiry black hair and a five-o'clock shadow, noticed me and flashed me a grin. He seemed to be in a particularly good mood. "Hey, CM. Crazy night, huh?"

"It happens. Can I trouble you for a Relic charge?"

"I suppose. How many guys do you need?"

"It's just for my chain, so one'll do."

"No biggie."

Despite my sudden request, he took the Hounding Chain and passed it to a Magus sitting at the table. She accepted it, just as content.

A Relic's mana naturally depleted over time, whether they were used or not. I asked for recharges pretty frequently, so everyone there was used to it by now. Magi sometimes refused to waste their mana on me if their party was about to head out to a treasure vault, but most of the time my position as clan master was persuasive enough. That was all thanks to Eva, who did a great job prioritizing member satisfaction.

The Hounding Chain glowed faintly as mana poured inside. Meanwhile, the leader began chatting to me.

"Have you heard? A stray showed up on the northern road. The hit was small-scale, but a merchant's caravan got taken out."

Zebrudia was a sprawling city. The roads leading in and out were far better equipped than those of other cities, and the monsters in its vicinity were regularly culled. Still, monsters did attack from time to time.

On rare occasions, monsters and phantoms did approach the roads—these were what we called strays, which were feared by travelers. They were usually more powerful than most monsters or phantoms, and their appearance was tricky to predict in advance. No matter how developed an area was, bodyguards were always a good idea. Without an escort protecting me, I'd personally never

set foot outside the city. Merchants had it pretty rough.

“Scary stuff. Is it a monster or a phantom? I guess if it wandered onto the road, it’s a phantom.”

To the north of the capital lay a forest abundant in resources. The likelihood of a monster leaving the comforts of the woods to sniff out a caravan was relatively low.

The leader looked up at me and gave a small nod. “Yeah. The Third Order has raised a warning and are calling for volunteers to take it out. It’s a toughie. The caravan had three Level 3 hunters on it.”

“No survivors, even with escorts? That’s some tough luck,” I said.

Monster deterrents didn’t work on phantoms, which were composed of mana material. As a general rule, they seldom left their vaults, but the sheer number of vaults in the vicinity of the capital meant that once every few months, one would make its way to civilization.

Still, there was nothing to worry about. The phantom must have been fairly tough to have taken out three Level 3s, but phantoms, who didn’t have physical bodies, didn’t last long in a place with so little mana material. It took some time for a phantom to naturally fade out of existence, but it would grow weaker with time. With the Third Order—whose duty was to keep the peace within the empire—on the job, it would be taken care of in no time.

In any case, it wasn’t my problem. The city, guarded by powerful knights, sturdy walls, and a robust population of hunters, was safe from any phantom. Without concern, I waited for my chain to finish charging.

The leader continued. “According to the hunters who saw it, it’s some kind of wolf phantom. The hunters working the caravan must have been caught off guard to get taken out like that on the open road.”

“Uh-huh... What?”

Wolf? Did he say wolf? I frowned at the word and recalled a map of the area. The White Wolf’s Den, the vault I’d thrown Tino into, was nestled in the forest by the northern road. It was easy to make the connection, since each vault produced the same set of phantoms, with little deviation.

Oblivious to my creeping despair, the leader went on. “No doubt they evolved in a neglected vault. That’s what happens when there are too many vaults around, I guess. But that’s sweet for us hunters.”

“W-Well, there are plenty of vaults up north,” I reasoned. “There are a bunch in the forest alone. If the phantom’s a wolf, it’s gotta be—”

“From the White Wolf’s Den, for sure,” the leader said. Steps hunters sure knew their stuff. He seemed well informed on the vaults in the area.

My stomach churning, I maintained my smile. “Right, it could be the White Wolf’s Den, or—”

“Oh? Is there another spot around here that spawns wolf phantoms? Nope. It fits the bill. The joint’s pretty unpopular ’cause of those low drop rates.”

For real? I could feel my face stiffening, which was noted with curiosity by the Magus charging my chain.

“If a phantom made it out of there, the den’s gotta be packed to the rafters. The Association should send out another warning. Heck, the government might even put out an extermination request.”

Killing phantoms wasn’t very lucrative since they didn’t leave behind a corpse, but once phantoms made their way out into the world and started disrupting commerce, it was a different story. Depending on the scale of the disruption, it wasn’t uncommon for the government to pay the Association a good sum of money to take care of the problem.

Of course, there was still a possibility that the wolf had come from somewhere else. Even if it had come from the White Wolf’s Den, Tino was headed there with a team of four, Li’l Gilbert’s Relic in tow. They’d figure something out.

“That wolf’s strong, you know? Don’t get yourself mauled trying to make a quick buck,” one of the party members teased.

Little did they know, the comment chilled me to the core. *Mauled? Is it that bad? I’ve never been to the White Wolf’s Den, so how strong are we talking? A Level 3 treasure vault would have pretty strong phantoms, no? That sounds all right. Tino’s pretty strong too.*

Just in case, I decided to have the party check out the quest file. Just in case. I had no ulterior motives, I swear. Smiling, I took the request from my pocket and spread it out on the table.

The leader's eyes widened as he read the request from top to bottom. Then he grinned again, looking impressed. "You're pulling my leg, CM. Acting like you hadn't heard about the wolf when you've already taken care of it."

"Right, uh-huh. Tino's on the case."

His face immediately froze. "Tino? The Level 4 Tino? You and your trials by fire..."

His partymates had retreated into their chairs, their smiles stuck strangely on their faces. This always happened to me. I just had terrible luck—and bad timing.

I didn't do it on purpose, okay?! When was this caravan attacked, anyway? How was I supposed to know about it? I might have been the clan master, but I was no taskmaster. If I'd known, I would have never sent the quest Tino's way. If I'd known, I would have picked another request.

The Thief-looking young man of the party poring over the file muttered, "Sure, it's a Level 3 vault, but when Level 5 hunters went missing, you threw in a Level 4 soloer?"

"You know, to give her experience... Wait, Level 5?"

Having finished charging my chains, the Magus pointed at a line in the quest file. "Yeah. See, right here."

The section of the file contained the list of hunters who needed rescuing, which I'd glossed over without a second thought. The Magus saw something in it, apparently.

"That Rudolph Davout's a Level 5 hunter, isn't he? He has a pretty famous pike. I see him pretty often around the Association. Did you not know—"

"Shut up, idiot. Our clan master knows everything about every hunter in the capital and every treasure vault there is! Heh, sorry about that, CM! Ena didn't mean anything by it." The party leader smiled stiffly. Ena the mage apologized

too. All I could manage was a bleak smile and a don't-worry-about-it wave of a hand.

What's this about me knowing everything? I can barely match my clan members' names to their faces. Who's out there spreading unrealistic rumors about me? I had too many guesses. How was I supposed to know about hunters outside of the clan? The only time I set foot in the Association branch nowadays was when I was getting my ass slapped. *What? Do these guys really think I know every hunter out there? How many hunters do they think there are in the capital alone?*

I took a deep breath and told myself to calm down. I never would have sent Tino if I had known a Level 5 hunter had gone missing, but—personality flaws aside—Tino was a reliable hunter. It wasn't time to panic yet.

Come to think of it, when I showed her the file, Tino did mention something about her only being Level 4. Damn that Gark, pinning such a dangerous quest on us! Tino's blood will be on his hands!

I took another deep breath. More importantly, I had to maintain my dignity (however surface level it was) as the clan master. I wouldn't have minded—Nay, I would have *welcomed* being ousted from my position, but there was much more at stake right now.

"It'll be a good learning experience," I said. "Don't worry, I sent her with three outsiders to back her up."

Even Li'l Gilbert had shown signs of following Tino's lead, and Rhuda and the Great Greg had to be better than nothing.

The leader didn't react as expected, only twitching the last remnant of his smile. "G-Gotcha..."

"You shackled her on an already difficult mission..."

"So this is how the infamous leader made the Grievors the best party in the capital..."

Those talented hunters, those freaks, were looking at me with a mix of fear and respect.

Infamous? What are they talking about?! I felt so beaten down that I could no longer keep up my smile. The leader shot to his feet, looking like he'd just come face-to-face with a monster in the wild.

I reached for the recharged Hounding Chain on the table and clicked it into place on my belt. Then I cleared my throat, reestablishing my badass exterior. "Sorry, but there's something I need to attend to. I'm heading off. Thanks for the charge."

"No, not at all. I'm sorry to have wasted your time with all that," the leader mumbled, his once friendly demeanor replaced with terrified formality. By now, members of the clan were staring at us from other tables in the lounge.

Ugh, this is bad. They're gonna think I'm some sadistic bastard who forced Tino into a suicide mission. It wasn't like that! I didn't do it on purpose!

I turned on my heel and hurried to the clan master's office, unsure of where else to go. Ark was out when I needed him most. The same went for the Grievors. Normally, hunters prepped extensively before embarking on a quest, but since this was a rescue mission, I'd rushed Tino's party on their way. They should have arrived at the vault by now. There was no time.

"It's okay," I muttered as my mind spun. "It's okay. The Purgatorial Sword. They have the Purgatorial Sword!"

Then it occurred to me. During the little tussle between Tino and Gilbert, I'd used up all of the greatsword's mana. I wondered if Li'l Gilbert had remembered to recharge his Relic before heading out to the treasure vault.

The memory carved into the deepest recesses of Tino Shade's mind was one of her mentor, following their first real sparring match after several months of basic training.

"You get it, T?" her mentor asked with a smile. In stark contrast to Tino, who was heaving on the ground, dog-tired, Liz showed not a single bead of sweat.

She tied her pink hair into a ponytail. Her peach-colored eyes were framed by luscious lashes, her unblemished skin bronzed by the sun. No one would have denied how adorable she looked.

From her ears dangled a pair of metallic heart-shaped earrings. Her limbs were slender, without a pinch of excess mass on them, and her breasts were modest compared even to Tino's flatlands. She was shorter than Tino, which had, when Tino had first sought her mentor's tutelage, led to people mistaking the apprentice for the senior of the two. No one dared to suggest that now.

"If Krai says crows have white feathers, they have white feathers. Do you see the point I'm trying to make?" she asked, holding up her forefinger as if teaching a child right from wrong.

The power Tino felt emanating from her mentor's minuscule frame far exceeded that of any being she'd come across before. It was hard to believe that they were only a few years apart in age.

There was once a group of hunters who had risen to glory faster than any other—freaks who time and time again breezed through deadly treasure vaults that had ended the careers of countless hunters before them. Tino and the rest of the "second generation" of talented hunters were merely following in their footsteps. Hence, Tino had never once prided herself on her talent.

Her mentor, Liz Smart, the Stifled Shadow, was a member of that legendary party. Watching Liz dash like a gust of wind through land and sky, like a shadow in the night, filled Tino with fear and admiration.

Although Liz was smiling, her eyes glinted with electrifying energy. "I'm not talking about loyalty or love. What I want from you, T, is absolute obedience."

A line like that would have enraged a more hot-tempered hunter. Liz was dead serious, though. The back of Tino's neck singed with uneasiness.

"I don't want you to question a single word Krai says." Liz peered into Tino's eyes, captivating her. A moment passed before Liz resumed her almost lyrical lesson. "It doesn't matter if you think it's a ridiculous joke, a nonsensical order, or even a command that puts your life in danger. I need you to obey his will, no questions asked. Crush every single enemy that opposes Krai. It doesn't matter if they're some powerful noble, a masterful hunter, or the emperor of Zebrudia. I can't stand the thought of those filthy rebels being alive even for a second. That's why I made you my apprentice. When I'm around, I'll slaughter them all. But I can't be with Krai twenty-four seven. You understand, don't you, T? You're

a smart girl.”

Tino was panting, still on the ground. “Yes, Lizzy.”

Talented hunters were sometimes described as freaks. Tino knew that not all hunters were equally freakish. Her mentor, however, was undeniably a freak that instilled fear even in fellow hunters. Her spiel, which she had given in an almost jesting tone, carried with it a scorching undertone that burned any thought of defiance to the ground.

Liz was serious. She saw everything in the world as a foe, and there was no room in her world for concessions. If Tino had shown any animosity towards Krai, her mentor would have killed her on the spot, snapping Tino like a weed to be picked.

Shorter and more slender than Tino, Liz looked the same as any normal human being, but that resemblance stopped at her looks. Tino only realized this some time later, once she had gained a little experience as a hunter.

The wary party traversed the narrow forest path, en route to the White Wolf’s Den. Tino led the pack, followed by Gilbert, Greg, and then Rhuda as their rearguard.

Hunter parties were meant to be formed with a balance of roles in mind. Each typically required a frontline fighter, a long-range fighter, a scout, and a healer. Tino’s makeshift party lacked a mage who could annihilate a large horde in one fell swoop, and a cleric who could heal severe injuries. Both were considered essential for surviving high-level vaults.

Greg and Gilbert were frontline fighters: Greg, a Warrior who comfortably handled a variety of weapons, and Gilbert, a Swordsman who specialized in one-on-one combat using his greatsword. They were each the quintessential frontline fighter, with enough physical strength to hold off the supernatural powers of a phantom, but without the finesse to handle magic attacks or a swarm of phantoms at once.

Meanwhile, Rhuda and Tino were both Thieves who fell short on pure strength, but they made up for it in their ability to scout out enemies. Despite

the sheer lack of balance in the party, the two Thieves were its silver lining.

Rhuda's days as a solo hunter had made her careful and alert—a department Tino, too, could hold her own in. Even if the party's surroundings were to be obscured, a hostile phantom wouldn't get the jump on them. Ambushes were a hunter's number one concern when traversing an unfamiliar vault. At least Tino's ragtag band had no reason to fear them.

The party's first concern was to figure out what was going on inside the vault. Even before they arrived there, an uncanny air swathed the woods. The march was tense. Something was in the air that only hunters who regularly faced monsters and phantoms could sense.

Now, what sounded like a howl reverberated from somewhere beyond the trees.

Greg scanned their surroundings and grunted. "Weird. Do you guys sense that? Whatever it is, it's not good. We haven't even made it to the vault yet, dammit."

"That's why I left a will," Tino said, squinting at the thick trees, each of them too large to wrap her arms around. "I didn't have a choice."

Hunters had a sixth sense for danger. Once their senses became too enhanced by mana material for their brains to process the stuff, warning bells for death manifested as hunches. *If you get a bad feeling, run for your life.* That was one of the cardinal rules of treasure hunting. Tino and her partymates had all learned that, one way or another.

The party was disquieted by whatever lurked in the forest. Tino, however, showed no fear. Only determination. Once she sensed the danger, she should have prioritized the survival of the party, especially since the abnormality was threatening enough for the other members to pick up on. However, when it came to this quest in particular, Tino and her party knew what they'd signed up for. Tino had laid all the dangers out in advance, regardless of whether they'd taken her word for it.

Rhuda, who had been carefully following along at the rear, recalled Tino's words and serious expression.

“If he’s giving this quest to me, it’s not gonna be easy. I don’t plan on dying, but I’m writing this just in case.”

At the time, Rhuda had thought it some kind of joke, but the glaring danger in the shadows left no room for doubt. “Are you saying Krai knew what was going on and sent us in anyway?” she asked.

Tino nodded. “Our party composition is no coincidence either.”

“You can’t be serious,” Greg replied dubiously. “Ain’t that a bit of a reach?”

Krai had acted like his appointment of Tino’s party members was arbitrary or off the top of his head. However, she, a master in all things her master, saw right through it.

Tino was one of the original members of the Steps. Even before the clan was formed, she had often interacted with the Grievors. Her treasure hunting career entailed backbreaking training leading up to equally backbreaking trials. This wasn’t the first time Krai had entrusted her with a quest. She understood now, though she couldn’t believe it at first, that the Grieving Souls had only attained the glory and recognition not because of the sum of each member’s talent, but because of the mastermind behind it.

“Master knows everything that’s happening at the vault and has assembled the necessary members to form a party.” She looked at Gilbert. “Even that test of strength of yours was only a part of that process.”

Gilbert went wide-eyed, now with less bark and bite since the sparring match.

Rhuda jumped in, panicked. “Hey, wait! The necessary members? It was a coincidence that I showed up to the recruitment meet. Doesn’t your clan have loads more hunters more talented than me?!”

“That’s right,” Gilbert added. “I’d never met Thousand Tricks before yesterday.”

They continued their protest, refusing to believe.

Tino let out a small sigh. Even though they weren’t quite at the vault, their commotion would more than likely attract the attention of monsters or phantoms. Maybe even this added layer of difficulty was all according to her

master's calculations. Regardless, Tino wanted to get this quest over with and return to the clan. Alive. In order to do that, she had to make her new party members understand that nothing about their circumstances was accidental. Tino couldn't imagine what they were about to face, but understanding the gravity of their mission made all the difference.

"Master is privy to all treasure vaults and hunters in the capital. He could easily predict your actions, even if he has never met you in person," Tino said, showing a hint of frustration.

Everyone in the Steps knew that much. Krai never did anything without good reason. Why else would a Level 8 show up late to his own recruitment event, rile up the crowd until the bar was nearly razed to the ground, and even find amusement in Gilbert's rage by delegating the sparring match against him to Tino? Krai wasn't an idiot. It was all an act. Tino could hardly believe her eyes, but there was no other explanation. His deception was too meticulous, too elaborate. Thousand Tricks played a thousand moves ahead.

Gilbert swallowed his words. He *had* sensed an unfathomable quality in Krai. Perhaps Thousand Tricks really could pull something like this off before breakfast. The Purgatorial Sword weighed heavily on Gilbert's back.

Among the many types of magic was the technique to add elements like fire and water to a weapon to boost that weapon's output and range. Weapon-type Relics often had affinity-granting attributes that produced the same effect without a Magus having to cast a spell. The fire affinity of the Purgatorial Sword set the blade ablaze, allowing its wielder to scorch their slashed enemies. The sword had been effective on every foe so far. But now...

Thousand Tricks had manipulated the sword's flames, which was far more than Gilbert had ever accomplished. If that was a glimpse into the true power of the sword, Gilbert had only mastered a small fragment of its potential. Gilbert was no rookie when it came to taking on treasure vaults, but he had never felt such a dreadful feeling about what was to come as he did about this one. He just couldn't shake it.

Seeing how nervous the rest of her party was, Tino decided to take a more reassuring approach. "Don't worry. Master knows all. He wouldn't give us a

quest we can't complete. If we're all ready to risk our lives, we'll make it through. There's no turning back, no matter what. That's why I wrote the will."

"Uh, right. Sure thing." Greg made an attempt at a smile. He wasn't going to let these youngsters see that every bone in his body was telling him to bolt. Why was Tino so determined to risk their lives for a carcass-collecting gig?

A shadow fell over them, blocking out the sunlight. Tino was first to notice the thing falling from the sky and shoved Greg out of the way. A second later, a dullish-gray glint flew past where his neck had been moments before.

Gilbert and Rhuda hopped back, preparing for combat. Greg, knocked off-balance, caught himself on the ground. It was then that they caught sight of their assailant: the silhouette that had snuck up on them without a scent or sound.

Wide-eyed, Rhuda watched the crimson beast, now quietly kneeling on the ground. "I thought the phantom was supposed to be a wolf," she whispered.

Gilbert stared into the glittering golden eyes directed at him, and then pointed the Purgatorial Sword at the beast. The crimson figure, having missed its surprise attack, rose lazily to its hind legs. Its crimson fur was wiry, its canine ears sharp. A thick tail that matched its coat extended from its hindquarters. The figure's nose twitched, as if sniffing out the hunting party.

Incredibly, the beast was almost entirely clad in bloodred armor. Underneath its gauntlets, the beast was clutching a weapon. It swung the tip of its blade in the air, as if in warning.

"It's wearing armor! This is all wrong!" Gilbert spat in disbelief.

"It's holding a sword," Tino muttered, sorrow creeping into her voice. "Touché, master. I never would have expected this..."

They had been told that the phantoms of the White Wolf's Den took the shape of a giant wolf. Only the beast's face and color matched the description they had been given.

As if to drown out Tino's words, the crimson wolf knight roared.

“Ugh, I’m gonna barf. It’s really time I quit.”

Ten minutes had passed since I’d been told about the unexpected dangers of what anyone would have thought was a piece-of-cake carcass-collecting gig. Now alone, I paced the clan master’s office, muttering curses into the air. It was a good thing Eva wasn’t there to judge me. If Tino had just refused the request and let me know why, I would have...

Was grumbling really all I could bring myself to do? Talk about being unproductive. Tino was far more important to me than some randos I’d sent her to rescue. I mean, for all I knew, they were already dead.

That said, Tino was Level 4—she knew the fundamentals of hunting. If things got dicey, she’d bring the party back. On the other hand, everyone else in the Steps had proven themselves unbelievably reckless, completely disregarding the basic guidelines that kept most hunters alive. No matter how fearsome an enemy they faced, a member of the Steps wouldn’t retreat that easily.

Tino must have been corrupted by them. Well, the most reckless hunters I knew were the Grievors, so she’d most likely gotten that from her mentor.

“Just use Li’l Gilbert and the Great Greg as meat shields if you have to!” I pleaded into the air. Surely, they’d have no regrets dying to protect Tino.

I’d been too thoughtless when picking her party members. At the very least, I should have given her some reliable members from the Steps. *Damn you, Gark. Why didn’t you give me a heads up?*

Actually, no. There was no excuse for this. No amount of mental gymnastics could let me weasel out of this one. It was all my fault. I could do nothing but grovel on the floor, screaming silent apologies.

But hey, I was sure they’d be fine. Tino knew the White Wolf’s Den spawned big wolves. She’d be well prepared. The wolves were like, only a little scarier than a normal wolf in the wild. They weren’t exactly tricky phantoms to deal with. Tino would make it... Tino *should* make it. That’s what I kept telling myself, but I was hardly reassured.

It was already dark outside. Streetlamps illuminated the capital streets, but there were no artificial lights in the woods.

Could I ask any of the clan members in the lounge for backup? No dice. Monsters and wild animals were most active at night, so no one wanted to travel when it was dark out. Besides, even if I sent someone right away, they wouldn't catch up to Tino.

I knew it. I'm useless without Ark.

Almost in denial, I made up my mind and walked up to the bookshelf that lined a wall of the office, which was filled with books on topics like clan management and the history of the capital. I reached for an awkwardly positioned knob and yanked it. The mechanism kicked in, and the bookshelf swung silently inward. Through the opening it produced, I could see a set of stairs leading downwards.

I hurried down the steps. At the bottom of them, I felt the wall for the light switch. When I flicked it, soft lamplight illuminated a room about twice the size of the office above. This was my own private quarters.

The room had no windows and contained a bed large enough for a whole party to sleep in, a bookshelf, a coffee table, a desk, and a couch. On the walls were bizarre paintings that had been gifted to me, along with a poster that outlined the three rules of the clan.

Most glaringly, the room was filled to the brim with Relics—swords, lances, sets of armor, coats, chains, rings, and so many more in varying shapes and sizes. Some of them I'd bought; some of them I'd been gifted; and of course, some of them I'd scored from treasure vaults.

The loot before me was the culmination of my party's career as the Grieving Souls. Just by selling all the Relics in the room for a fair price, the Grievors could have easily retired in abject opulence, but we were yet to finish what we'd started.

My stomach churning, I began rummaging for a Relic that could dig me out of this impossible hole.

Just as I was reentering the office, I bumped into Eva. She looked towards the opened bookshelf door, then blinked at me. Now that I was decked out in the

Relics I'd so quickly but meticulously picked out, I looked like a walking treasure vault.

I was wearing my indigo overcoat and had a crossbow Relic and a sword Relic of an awkward length slung on my back. I had a ring Relic on every finger and, as if that weren't enough, more of them dangling on the chain Relic at my waist. Even more ring Relics were stuffed into the pouch I'd attached to my belt. There were a hell of a lot of ring Relics out there, but come on—a man only has ten fingers!

My clothes under the coat were ordinary hunter's garb, durable and lightweight. Those were probably the only things on me that weren't Relics.

However, even with all those Relics, I still felt like I had to barf, dreading what could possibly happen. Through experience, I had learned that no amount of Relics made much of a difference when it came to making a talentless schmuck capable. So what? I was going to do everything in my power. This was on me.

The vice clan master was wearing her usual white uniform, looking as alert as ever, despite the late hour. The studious administrator that she was, Eva must have still been working, but there was no surprise in her gaze directed at the open bookshelf. By now, almost everyone in the clan knew where my quarters were.

"What's with all that gear, Krai?"

"Heh heh heh heh... I'm going for a walk."

Eva stared at me exasperatedly. "If you were gonna worry so much, you shouldn't have given her the quest."

Crumbling under the pressure of the situation, I couldn't stop my awkward laugh. "Heh heh heh heh... I don't know what you're talking about."

Eva saw right through me, but not because of my arsenal of Relics. I pretty much always covered myself with them. After years of us working together, she could read me like a book.

"Why don't you take another party as backup?" she suggested.

The suggestion *was* tempting, but asking a favor of another party was

different than asking a favor of your own party, even if we were in the same clan. At this hour, I doubted any party would be willing to venture to a dangerous vault, and I couldn't expect them to.

Steadying my breath, I decided to reassure Eva. "There's no problem. This is all according to plan."

"Wait." Completely ignoring my desperate bravado, Eva quickly approached me, her eyes on the necklace I wore: a simple necklace with a metallic capsule at the end. It wasn't a Relic, but it was far more dangerous than any Relic down in my room.



“Isn’t that Sitri’s slime?” Eva asked.

I didn’t say a word.

“Isn’t that the one you’re not supposed to touch because it could destroy the entire city?” She stared into the capsule without reaching for it, showing a healthy sense of caution.

I wondered who’d told Eva about it. A few faces came to mind, but I’d deal with that later. The capsule had been stored in a safe-type Relic in the middle of my room. A modified slime was supposed to be contained in it, but I’d never seen that slime myself.

Slimes were by far the weakest monsters of all time. Their liquid bodies were basically bags of internal organs. Slice them or dice them, strike them or burn them, they went down with ease. They came in many varieties but most were unnoteworthy. Even I, Krai Andrey, the weakest of the weak, could easily take on the average slime, but the one inside the capsule was different—according to its creator, anyway.

I tried to stay on top of recharging my Relics so I could use them, but most of them were running on empty, having not been charged since the Grievors left for a vault two weeks prior. I’d chosen the capsule to compensate. Tino was a good hunter who’d be totally fine, and I would avoid any combat at all cost. Still, I decided to pack an ace up my sleeve, being the careful badass that I was.

I didn’t want to bring the capsule. In fact, I hated the thought of it, but the other non-Relic weapons in my arsenal weren’t light enough for me to carry. I wasn’t even clear on how to use the slime when it came down to it. I’d be in a vault, though, so I figured I could chuck it and run. I’d do anything to save our dear mascot.

“Very funny, Eva. That’d be a blatant violation of imperial law.”

I prided myself in being a lawful citizen. My friends, however, saw laws as challenges rather than strict guidelines.

Before Eva saw through my facade, I hurried to the large window behind my desk and swung it open, letting in a breeze colder than I had expected. The windows in the building were made to open or else some people would just

break through them. This time, it worked to my advantage.

Eva watched me, unusually concerned, her eyes locked on Sitri's slime. That concern was most likely of the professional kind, over whether my actions would negatively impact the clan.

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" she asked.

With all my strength, I retained my beaming smile. I was doomed. Believe me, if I could, I would have taken backup, but my Night Hiker could only be used by one person.

After proving itself a fearsome warrior, the wolf knight dissolved into thin air, vanishing without a trace.

Rhuda stared at where the wolf had been standing. "Um, don't you think we should go back?" she asked.

Greg lowered his trusty longsword, which he had fully utilized against the beast. "Yeah. We knew things would get dicey, but no one could have predicted this. At any rate, there's no chance those lost hunters survived. I'm not risking my life for nothing."

The wolf knight sure had been tough. The armor covering its entire body had protected the beast from most attacks, and every swing of its blade, powered by its bulking arms, packed a fatal punch. Beast-type phantoms were generally powerful and dexterous, but the wolf's armor made it too dangerous of a foe to be expected from a Level 3 treasure vault. Even the Level 4 Greg with all of his experience in the field would have had a rough time fending one off on his own.

The party had taken out the phantom and come out mostly unscathed only because they outnumbered the stray. Plus, Tino had constantly drawn its attention, keeping its attacks focused on her. If anyone in the party had been injured, things would have been different; they may not have been wiped out as a result, but the battle would have dragged on much longer.

Without batting an eye, the leader of their party looked back at Greg and Rhuda. "Nothing changes. We haven't even reached the vault."

“This isn’t the time to be stubborn,” Greg said. “Your life’s gotta be worth more than that! That thing clearly came from the White Wolf’s Den. It’s not every day a phantom leaves its vault, but the place is probably crawling with those things.”

Rhuda shuddered, gazing in the direction of the treasure vault. “When I came here the other day, there were only normal wolves.”

The phantoms they had expected to find at the White Wolf’s Den were called Red Moons, large wolves named after the extinct Silver Moons. These were the phantoms that Rhuda had encountered when she’d ventured into the vault solo a few weeks prior. She could handle a Red Moon somewhat comfortably on her own, but she had soon realized that she wouldn’t stand a chance if she were surrounded by a pack of them, so she’d fled the vault.

The wolf knight they had just encountered was far more challenging than a Red Moon. Rhuda’s dagger couldn’t slice through the wolf’s heavy armor. To deal any damage, she would have to go for its uncovered head or the unplated joints in its armor. At her current level, she would have a tough time aiming at its head while simultaneously dodging the fleet-footed beast’s attacks. Some practice might change that, but she preferred not to practice her skills while risking her life.

Tino shrugged as if she had expected the outcome. “This is just training.”

“Training?!” Greg and Rhuda repeated.

Rhuda felt a vast divide between herself and Tino, who was remarkably calm despite their abnormal situation. The girl’s attitude suggested she’d overcome many a challenge this daunting. Rhuda felt in Tino the root of First Steps’ prosperity.

“And the Great Greg has got it wrong,” Tino said.

“Just call me Greg.”

“You’ve got it wrong, Greg.”

Tino glanced at Gilbert, who was staring inquisitively at his sword. That Relic was the most powerful weapon they had. Personality aside, the boy would probably be their best offense. Her master hadn’t thrown a reckless child into

her party for no reason.

Watching Greg and Rhuda fight had confirmed that their party had potential. Enough potential, at least, to keep Tino from retreating the party. She had been given all the pieces she needed to complete this quest. Her master was right, as always.

Tino turned in the direction of the treasure vault, where the intermittent howls continued. “Master assigned us this quest because the hunters we are rescuing are still alive.”

Greg’s jaw hit the ground. Tino’s claim defied all reason.

Treasure vaults were deadly terrains. When a hunter went missing, they were—nine times out of ten—dead. Their odds were even worse in unpopular vaults like the White Wolf’s Den, where they couldn’t seek out help from other hunters in the area. Even if there was a chance that a lost hunter was alive, the only way to be sure was to check out the vault.

Now, Tino was claiming that her master knew, without leaving the capital, that these hunters were alive, when the most anyone could do to predict a lost hunter’s survivability was calculate their odds based on how long they’ve been lost. If it had been anyone else that made this claim, Greg would not have believed it.

Tino returned him an icy glare. “Every move my master makes is meaningful. Greg, what do you think it means to be one of the only Level 8 hunters in the capital?”

Breaking through the mold of treasure hunting, making the impossible possible, was what made Krai Andrey a Level 8 hunter.

“Right,” Rhuda said, forcing a hopeful tone. “If the targets are still alive, we have to keep going. Right, Gilbert?”

Gilbert didn’t answer. Instead, he scowled at his sword. “The Purgatorial Sword’s out of juice,” he grumbled. “I just charged it up the other day. I can’t recharge it on my own, you know?”

“What?”

Every hunter knew to charge their Relics in advance. The Purgatorial Sword, especially, required huge amounts of mana due to its high consumption. Since Gilbert didn't have enough mana of his own to recharge it, he frequently had it recharged by one of the city's Magi that specialized in recharging Relics.

The last time Gilbert had recharged his sword was a few days ago, in preparation for First Steps' recruitment drive. He hadn't even gone to a treasure vault since, so the sword should have had mana to spare. Examining it now, though, he had realized there wasn't a drop left. If there were a mage in their party, this wouldn't have been a problem, but none of them had the mana to charge it.

Foreseeing what lay ahead in their quest, Tino muttered, "Master, why do you hate me?"

They hadn't even reached the vault yet.

The White Wolf's Den was a cave-type vault. Silver Moons had been a highly intelligent and social species that formed large packs and shared dens in the ground. At the species' peak, this particular den had hosted over a thousand wolves. It stretched wide and deep like an anthill the size of a small village. Even after the Silver Moons had gone extinct and their den had transformed into a treasure vault, the cave had mostly retained its original structure.

Tino sighed from behind a bush, where she observed the gaping entrance to the vast treasure vault.

Before the Silver Moons' extinction, they had always guarded the entrance to their den. Now, however, that same entrance was guarded by wolf knights in crimson fur and full-body armor.

Even from where she crouched, roughly fifty meters away, Tino could smell the beasts' scent in the air. Their burning eyes glowed eerily in the darkness, and their drawn blades glinted dully in the moonlight.

"Look, it's not just swords—some of them have bows and firearms," Gilbert said in a hushed voice.

Greg frowned. "Damn. Then it doesn't look like that stray was an outlier.

Were they pumped up with mana material? What happened here?”

When mana material that permeated the world pooled and reached high levels of concentration, it produced treasure vaults and phantoms. For one reason or another, mana material could become even more concentrated in certain areas, boosting vaults and phantoms to a higher level. This irregular phenomenon feared by hunters was called evolution.

Evolution was a rare occurrence. Because mana material usually circulated the world along the vast network of ley lines below the earth, there were limitations as to how much mana material could collect in any given location. Evolution was believed to be the result of environmental changes or the movement in ley lines that resulted in higher concentrations of mana material.

The Zebrudian Empire, which raked in a fortune from the surrounding treasure vaults, kept a keen eye on any shifts in the ley lines. If any sign of evolution was spotted, hunters were meant to be informed. However, neither Tino nor her party had heard a peep. Nonetheless, with the area teeming with numerous phantoms a step above what they'd expected to face, they had to face reality.

Steadying her breath, Tino accessed the threat. The phantoms guarding the entrance were significantly larger than the Red Moons they had expected. Since the wolf knights were standing on their hind legs, they were twice as tall as Red Moons.

From their earlier battle, the party had discovered that the phantoms' strength and toughness had been buffed proportionately to their increase in size. In that regard, they'd been lucky to be able to assess the threat before arriving at the vault. In fact, even that initial encounter was likely a part of her master's plan.

“The den was dug by Silver Moons to accommodate their size,” she said. “The armored wolves won't be able to jump around inside... I think.”

“So we'd be better making a dash for the cave than facing them in the open,” Gilbert replied. “The problem is, I don't have a way to attack them long-range.”

Five wolf-men stood guard outside the den. Though they wore identical thick armor, they all carried different weapons: three carried swords, one wielded a

bow and arrow, and the last bore a long-barrel firearm that no one in the party recognized. Judging by the number of wolves and their formation, there was no way to get into the cave without being noticed by one. To avoid the risk of being trapped between the wolves around the entrance and those that lurked within the vault, running past the guards was a bad idea.

“Are the lost hunters inside?” Greg asked. “Are you telling me these howling red flags didn’t deter them?”

“It’s possible they didn’t notice the change until they were inside,” Tino said. “And an evolved treasure vault isn’t all bad. It also produces better Relics.”

Relics materialized in the same manner as phantoms. The denser the concentration of mana material, the more powerful the Relics within. The unpopularity of the vault made it just as enticing—fewer hands in the pot meant a better chance of scoring a Relic.

“Anyone have any long-range attacks?” Tino asked.

Greg and Rhuda exchanged looks.

By long-range attacks, Tino had specifically meant those that could damage the wolf knights in spite of their armor. Rhuda could throw her dagger, for example, but that wouldn’t leave a scratch through the wolves’ thick armor and fur.

The group’s silence spoke volumes to Tino, who realized how skewed their party truly was. Any normal party would have at least one member who specialized in long-range attacks.

With both hands, Gilbert gripped the Purgatorial Sword on his back, shifting his weight. “All right, I’ll charge. As long as I take out the bow and gun first, we can handle the rest.”

“Excuse me? You really are an idiot,” Tino said.

“Mana or no mana, my sword’s still better than a normal one. It’s fine. I’m used to this kind of stuff.”

Gilbert was wearing a set of thin metal-plated leather armor, which was common for hunters that preferred mobility to the protection of heavy armor.

He was better shielded than Tino and Rhuda, who dressed even lighter than he did, but that wasn't enough to make him a suitable decoy. Not only did his two-handed greatsword prevent him from carrying a shield, it also sacrificed agility for pure damage output. As a result, Gilbert was lackluster in dodging and blocking.

Even still, the boy was untroubled, as though he was used to scrapes like this one.

"You did say you carried your old party," Greg remarked, sounding almost impressed.

Gilbert snorted.

Some hunters were more skilled than others, which meant that most parties had a standout member when it came to talent. Hunters who far exceeded the skill of the rest of their party often built habits of taking charge themselves, simply because that led to more wins. Doing so wasn't necessarily a harmful habit, but it could be a cause for conflict if a hunter like that found themselves in a party with equally matched members.

Tino glared at Gilbert, preventing him from moving. "Don't step out of line. If you want to kill yourself, that's your problem. As leader of this party, I'm responsible for bringing you all home alive. Got it?"

"Huh?" Gilbert stared back in shock. After how their party had been formed and how Tino treated him, he hadn't expected her to show concern for his life. It would have been one thing if they had been hunting together for years, but this party had been thrown together mere hours ago.

In the first place, if Tino wanted to, she was agile enough to easily get away from even a large pack of wolves. A small part of Gilbert had expected her to make him a human shield. It wasn't unthinkable in their line of work. Every gig was life or death, every man for himself.

Tino saw this in Gilbert's reaction and declared in contempt, "I will not leave anyone behind. Master expects me to perform as a party leader should. Bringing all of you back to the capital alive is the bare minimum requirement."

Tino knew full well that a hunter couldn't always afford idealism like that. At

times, a leader had to cut a member off to protect the rest of the party. However, that wasn't expected of her today.

She looked at him firmly, channeling her mentor as she said, "Don't mistake me for the kind of hunter that deserts her party members."

Her master would have never given her a quest that required her to leave a hunter behind. Krai Andrey, the master of First Steps, would never allow that. Even though she was leading a ragtag party of strangers—no, precisely for that reason—Tino Shade saw this as a test of her leadership.

Breathing the cold night air, Tino steadied her beating heart. She then looked at each member of her party and said with resolve befitting of a leader, "Rhuda and I are faster, so we'll go out and draw them away. We've trained to dodge long-range weapons. Greg and Gilbert will ambush the archer and gunner from behind. Bows and guns are nothing to worry about when you get up close."

Please, let Tino survive, at least. Get her to use the rest of them as shields if she has to.

Gritting my teeth, I flew through the moonlit sky, piercing through the pummeling air. Thanks to the coat Relic on my back, I was soaring like a loosed arrow. And, like a loosed arrow, there was no turning back for me. All I could do was steer as I shot through the darkness.

In no time at all, I had passed over the gates nestled in the high walls that surrounded the capital. Now, only a stretch of unlit road and the endless fields moved below me. Despite the picturesque view, all I could do was to try not to barf.

The Night Hiker was a coat-type Relic of midnight blue with a lining of white gems on the collar. As its name suggested, the Relic granted its wearer the power of flight, which was an extremely rare ability for a Relic to possess.

Flight-granting Relics that weren't vehicles were particularly popular and expensive. My Night Hiker was the only such Relic in my collection, but it came with some serious drawbacks. The "Human Missile" incident involving the Relic's previous owner had been a terrible tragedy that advertised both the

item's convenience and danger to the public. With breakneck propulsion, the hunter had been rocketed into his ceiling and straight up to heaven. Before it could be destroyed, the Night Hiker, with the blood of a talented hunter on its clasp, had been taken in by me.

There was no arguing that the Relic was defective, but there was also no arguing that it allowed me to fly. It came with plenty of issues: I couldn't steer it with anything near precision, and it emphasized propulsion over gravity manipulation, so I couldn't use it to hover in place (unlike if I used some other flying Relic). But hey, at least I could fly, and that thing had some serious speed. It was fast—too fast for anyone to use safely.

Every Relic was based on some item in history. I would have liked to sit the inventor of the original item down and lecture him on the basics of flight safety.

Before I knew it, I'd covered a distance that would have taken the average freak an hour to run, even at their superhuman pace. Now, I was flying above the forest. Traversing the woods on foot—navigating the dense trees while stepping over the rocks, roots, and branches—would have been exhausting; however I had no such troubles. I was soaring above the canopies. The birds and beasts of the forest whined and shrieked as I whizzed past, but I was the one who should be shrieking.

Soon, with my shaky vision, I somehow spotted the treasure vault: a gaping hole in the middle of a clearing. There were no other cave-type vaults in the area, so there was no mistaking it. The problem remained, however, that my coat didn't have any brakes.

Biting down hard, I veered left and low, diving straight into the hole.

Phantoms were neither randomly created nor invincible. Just as each Relic materialized based off of an item that had once existed somewhere in the world, each phantom was born in the image of a creature that had once roamed the world. That meant that the hulking wolf-men and their blades had both existed before.

Gilbert blocked one of the blades with his greatsword. His arms creaked and his legs nearly buckled under the force of the wolf's overhead swing, but even

so, Gilbert stood strong.

The wolf knights, the wolf phantoms armed with various weapons, boasted terrible strength and toughness, as well as a dexterity unbecoming of their towering stature. Though the party had only fought a few of them, they had found that the wolves' strength surpassed Gilbert's and that their dexterity was on par with Rhuda's.

The phantoms far outclassed the human hunters in both endurance and fortitude. Each of the wolves' attacks threatened grave injury. While Tino was more accustomed to dealing with dire threats, that wasn't the case for the others in her party who wisely stuck to vaults they could traverse with relative safety. Still, there was one thing that Tino's party had a leg up on against their fearsome foes: teamwork.

While Gilbert held the wolf knight's blade with his, Greg stepped up, using his longsword to pierce the joint between the knight's gauntlet and vambraces. As the phantom loosened its grip on its greatsword, Gilbert parried it to his left, letting the wolf strike the ground beside him.

The wolf knight roared with anger, glaring with murderous intent at the two Swordsmen. Then, suddenly, the hulking beast toppled over, its eyes still wide. Tino had crept up behind the knight, hopped up almost to the ceiling, and drove her blade into the back of its neck. The dark-red shortsword she held with both hands was a fortunate keepsake dropped by one of the wolf knights they'd defeated in the den.

Tino had put her entire weight into her swing, slicing through the thick fur, muscle, and bone, halfway into the wolf knight's neck. Dead on impact, the phantom dissipated without so much as a howl. Tino landed silently on her feet.

Gilbert watched the wolf knight disappear and then heaved a breath of relief, his face mired with a hint of fatigue. "Ha, we did it."

Greg scowled at his hands blushed with the effort of piercing wolf knight fur. "This quest is getting less worth it by the minute," he said.

They were all forced to exert themselves to cut through the hard wolfskin.

As Tino had predicted, the interior of the den was too small for the wolf

knights to properly maneuver. Width of the place aside, the den's ceiling was so low, the wolves' heads nearly scraped it. This meant the wolves couldn't take to the air like the stray that had ambushed the party. On the other hand, the pressure of facing down large phantoms in a dark, claustrophobic space gnawed away at the party's morale.

Having masterfully struck the wolf's neck, Tino assessed their battle, her expression unchanged. "It's not hard to take them down with the four of us. Each of them may be powerful, but they don't think to work together."

This was the wolf knights' most glaring weakness and the party's win condition. As fearsome as the knights were, they had no sense of cooperation. They ignored their kin in peril to charge at the enemy. Even when multiple wolf knights appeared at once, Tino was able to lure all but one away while her three party members took out the single wolf. This was a dangerous tactic in its own right, but it was effective in a situation like this, where fearsome beasts lurked at every corner.

"And I found a weapon already," Tino added.

"If only they'd drop another one," Greg said.

Tino preferred to fight empty-handed, but that didn't cut it against the wolf knights. While she carried a dagger short enough so as not to impede her movement, in this case, the blade was insufficient in both power and length. Finding a weapon that could one-shot a wolf knight if aimed at its weak spot was a lucky break.

Rhuda sighed in relief, having dedicated her energy to watching their surroundings and keeping lookout for openings.

As tense and exhausted as the party members were, their exploration was going smoothly. With two Thieves on the team, they didn't have to worry about being ambushed. Avoiding wolf knights wasn't difficult when the beasts usually wandered the den alone.

Even when the party had had to fight, their makeshift teamwork had gotten them through. Gilbert had some mettle to back up his talk, and Greg had enough experience that he could match the pace of his partymates. All the pair had to do was stop a wolf knight in its tracks so that Tino could finish it off.

Alternately, if Tino had a wolf knight distracted, they would instead do the honors.

While Rhuda wasn't involved in the flashy combat, she carried her weight. If not for Tino, she would have been the party's sole scout, and her presence allowed Tino to focus on fighting. The party balance was a delicate one that would fail if any one of them were to get hurt, but so far, they were making it through the vault.

Everything seemed calculated and preplanned, even the earlier weapon drop. As ludicrous as the notion seemed, Tino couldn't help but believe it. "Master was right. Master is the best," she muttered to herself.

"R-Right," Greg managed to say.

Party and clan leaders, who had to direct and command other self-assertive hunters, had to be charismatic. Tino's trust for her clan master seemed overzealous to Greg, who hadn't sensed a lick of charisma from the guy upon facing him. Greg was confident in the eyes he had trained through years of treasure hunting, and he hadn't sensed the star power that great hunters possessed. At the recruitment event, when he had first been told who Krai was, he'd thought it was a joke.

Even now, after learning that the guy was *the* Thousand Tricks, Greg couldn't quite believe it—nor could he take Tino's word that every step of their quest had been calculated. He would have sooner believed that Krai had earned his Level 8 rank through connections and bribery, but the undeniable trust Tino—a very capable hunter—had in Krai prevented him from arguing.

Greg had no intention of causing strife during a hunt, so he swallowed his words. If the group made it back alive, he'd have chances to test Krai's "genius" for himself. For now, he had to focus on surviving that bizarre treasure vault.

Tino's shoulders quivered as she looked at Greg, who was sheathing his longsword. "There has to be more. This is nothing compared to master's usual trials."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Gilbert asked, unknowingly speaking for himself and Greg.

Any sane hunter would have fled the den by now. Hunters expected the unexpected when entering a treasure vault they had no information on, but such unexpected events arising there was a sign of a major disturbance. Neither Rhuda, Greg, nor Gilbert could imagine any harsher trial than this.

“We’ll proceed with caution,” Tino declared. “There was no sign of anyone near the entrance—no bodies, no belongings. They should be farther in.”

Gilbert Bush’s every sense was ablaze, unclouded by his fatigue. The electrifying air of the battlefield, the putrid stench, and the powerful, never-before-seen phantoms brought him elation rather than fear.

“I can’t do this anymore. I can’t keep up with you. I quit,” a young man in Gilbert’s old party had said the day before Gilbert left. They had stuck together since Gilbert’s first day in the city. The young man was three years older and more experienced than Gilbert, but he was also noticeably less skilled. He had worked hard at his craft, always striving to improve himself and seeking advice from other hunters. Still, Gilbert had left him in the dust.

Gilbert, too, had always put in his share of effort. Back then, he had loathed the man’s decision, as well as that of the remaining party members who’d followed suit, but now that he found himself in a treasure vault beyond his skill level, he was beginning to understand their way of thinking. The decision his former partymates made had been for all of them; Gilbert now felt that he should have been more considerate of their feelings.

More than that, however, fighting alongside party members of equal or greater skill than him was a rush. Gilbert had only hunted with one party, barring the occasional temp arrangement, so he had only ever hunted with those weaker than him. Now, though, he had allies he could count on.

Greg wasn’t as powerful with the sword as Gilbert was, but he was deft enough with it to strike the joints in the wolves’ armor, and Tino’s leap into the decisive blow to the wolf’s neck had been nothing short of spectacular. While Rhuda, with her meager weapon, hadn’t dealt a significant blow to a wolf, she had managed all tasks expected of a Thief, from spotting enemies to diverting their attention, all of which required a finesse Gilbert had no shred of.

Fighting the formidable wolf knight as a team had ignited a feeling within Gilbert that he hadn't felt for a long time. That feeling raced through Gilbert's heart, fueling him as he pushed onward. With every battle, his sword felt lighter. A few hours had passed since they had entered the vault, but Gilbert showed no sign of slowing down.

"Having a good time, kid?" Greg asked.

"Ha. I'm just getting started."

At first, Gilbert had struggled to hold off a wolf knight's blade, but now when their swords clashed, he could start to push back. It wasn't that he hadn't been giving it his all from the start. Physically or mentally, Gilbert was growing stronger.

As another wolf knight crumbled to the ground, Gilbert's heavy breaths pumped his shoulders. He let out a longing sigh at his sword. "If only there were mana in here!"

The Purgatorial Sword had completely lost its use as a Relic, but neither Gilbert nor anyone else in the party had enough mana to recharge it. If Gilbert were able to utilize the sword's ability, he would have been able to take out the wolf knights much more easily. Even though it was impossible for him to perform a feat like Thousand Tricks had, he could have at least burned through the phantoms' blades. In turn, the party's exploration would have gone much more smoothly.

"You shouldn't even be using a Relic yet," Tino scoffed. "Rely on a Relic, and you'll become rusty. That's why I don't use one."

By now, Gilbert had grown accustomed to his tiny leader's condescension. "Do you not have one, then?" he simply asked.

Now that he thought about it, Gilbert realized he had never seen Tino use a Relic. Earning Level 4 usually required a hunter to dive into enough treasure vaults to at least find a few Relics, regardless of their quality. As a member of a large clan, Tino could even be gifted one by a fellow member. Gilbert looked at her with curiosity.

Tino dusted herself off. "A Relic is an ace up the sleeve. It shouldn't be used in

normal fights, and you shouldn't jump into fights where you'll need your Relic to win. Part of this quest is meant to teach you that. I'm sure of it. Master didn't drain the mana from your sword out of spite."

"Some teacher he is," Gilbert grumbled. He found the story incredible, but Tino not using a Relic backed up her claim. Besides, she had stomped all over him back when they'd both fought barehanded. He looked down at the Purgatorial Sword again.

"That's why all Relics I find in treasure vaults are given to master through Lizzy, my mentor. Master assesses the Relic and if it's a good one, he takes me out for ice cream. Master knows all."

Greg's eyelids twitched. "Sounds like he's using you to fetch Relics," he said.

"No. Master doesn't like sweet things, but he takes me anyway. Master is the best."

Gilbert agreed with Greg, but seeing how serious Tino was, he held his tongue.

After just under an hour's walk, the party came upon an open space. The tired Rhuda used the back of her hand to wipe the sweat from her brow before slowly surveying the area. It was at least wide enough for several wolf knights to stand side by side.

Tino was breathing calmly, her clothing unblemished, her expression as calm as it had been when they had first entered the vault. "We should be close to the alpha's lair. It used to be the domain to the alpha Silver Moon before the den became a treasure vault," she said.

Greg scowled. "The boss room... Wanna rest up for a bit?"

"Boss room" was hunter lingo for the heart of a treasure vault, where an especially powerful phantom was most likely to appear. After all, phantoms didn't materialize at random.

Generally speaking, phantoms grew stronger the deeper one ventured into a vault due to a higher concentration of mana material. Historical treasure vaults

in particular had specific locations that generated the most powerful phantoms. If the vault was a castle, the boss room was most likely the throne room; if it was a tower, they'd appear on the highest floor; and if the vault was a ship, you'd guess right to check the captain's quarters. In this case, the boss room was the alpha's lair. There was no guarantee that a "boss" would actually appear, but approaching the room demanded caution.

Tino reassessed her party. Rhuda was Level 3, while the rest of them were Level 4. By the time a hunter reached Level 3, their physical endurance was buffed by their continuous intake of mana material. Every battle fought in the vault this day had been life or death for them, but Gilbert and Rhuda could keep going. Their faces showed some weariness, but not enough for them to stop moving.

Gilbert caught Tino's look and held up his fist. "I can do this for days."

"I can go for a few more battles," Rhuda added.

Nowhere in a treasure vault was truly safe. A member of the party capable of setting up a barrier could guarantee a certain degree of safety for their party when they wanted to rest, but not one of them was capable of doing so. Besides, there was a good chance a patrolling wolf knight would spot the party anyway. Resting in a place like this wasn't all that restful, when all was said and done.

Tino made her decision—they'd charge into the storm. Resting whenever possible was an important part of keeping a party alive, but this party was in good shape. It would be best for them to check off the boss room while they were still on a roll.

"We'll check out the boss room first," Tino declared. "The lost hunters should be somewhere nearby, so we'd better pick 'em up and get out of here."

"All right, chief. Let's do this." Greg took a deep breath and turned towards the boss room.

Careful not to make a sound, the party walked along the edge of the path towards the boss room. The only light in the den was produced by a series of glowing stones placed a few meters apart, most likely by hunters who'd come before them.

Roughly ten meters away from the boss room, Tino stopped. She closed her eyes and placed her palm flat against the dirt wall. There, she focused entirely on the sounds and smells of the den, searching for any distant signs of life. She felt the flow of cold air brushing past her face and listened to the heartbeats and hushed breaths of her allies.

After searching for some time, Tino let out a long sigh. "Something's there."

Greg grunted. "Any chance it's the wayward hunters?"

"It's most likely the boss. Master's quests usually involve a big boss."

"For real?" Greg didn't know whether he should have been surprised or incredulous.

Phantoms that appeared in boss rooms were a step or two above the other phantoms that appeared in vaults. Judging by the strength of the wolf knights the party had faced, the boss wouldn't be so impossibly powerful that they couldn't defeat it.

By rational treasure hunting standards, though, a move like this was foolhardy. Ordinarily, the boss room would have been inhabited by a particularly large and powerful Red Moon, but the party couldn't count on that, this time. What's worse, they hadn't found a single Relic in the vault. Other hunters certainly weren't missing out.

"Shouldn't we run?" Greg suggested.

Tino's shapely brows slightly pinched. "You said that already. That said, we've come this far unscathed. We can handle the boss."

Greg scowled, taking in Tino's words. She sure had a point, but he couldn't bring himself to agree with her. For one thing, the wolf knights were much stronger than the phantoms in the vaults Greg usually frequented. A hunter's number one concern was keeping themselves safe. One rule of thumb for deciding whether or not to take on a treasure vault was considering whether the hunter could take on the phantoms alone.

If Greg had known the current state of the White Wolf's Den, he would not have joined the party. The quest they'd been roped into was a charity case that paid little to nothing in both coin and Relics. He had joined mostly out of

curiosity because a member of the Steps had invited him. If the same offer had come from a random hunter, he would have laughed them out of the bar—especially if he had known that he'd face phantoms stronger than those he was accustomed to.

Greg stroked the hilt of the longsword sheathed on his belt. It wasn't an especially well-made sword, but he had taken good care of it these past few years.

"You're too cautious to have a face like that," Tino said.

The rest of the party stared back at her.

She quietly added, "We don't grow from easy quests. You are a good hunter, Greg. Being cautious isn't a bad thing, but you need to take risks if you want to do more than survive."

"But I..." Greg was at a loss for words. He had to admit, the girl had made a good point.

The death rate among treasure hunters was high compared to those of other careers, but most of those deaths were accounted for by rookies. The longer a hunter worked in the field, the less likely they were to die. Improving their craft was one reason for that, of course, but the larger contributing factor was that a seasoned hunter took fewer risks, playing it safe and never taking on a foe they had a chance of losing to. As hunters watched their friends and comrades die, the less adventurous they became. This led to many experienced hunters idling around Level 3, while some younger hunters rose through the ranks as quickly as Gilbert had.

While mana material strengthened hunters physically, the substance had no effect mentally. Most hunters hovered at or below Level 3 because raising a level required accumulating points in the Association's system, and those points were hard to come by without venturing into treasure vaults of appropriate levels. What really encouraged most hunters to remain stagnant was the reality that a Level 3 hunter could make a decent living just by taking on vaults below their level.

Greg was now Level 4, having passed the Level 3 threshold, but he hadn't gained a level in a long time. He would have been lying if he said that wasn't a

sore spot for him.

Tino's dark, nebulous eyes peered into Greg's. "Greg, I think you came to First Steps after all those years because you wanted to do something about that."

"I..." Greg bit his lip, unable to speak. Tino's observation struck home. He couldn't remember when he had last dared visit a vault with a phantom this powerful.

"I'm pretty sure that's why master added you to this party," Tino said.

"What?!"

"This quest is the perfect opportunity for you to step out of your comfort zone," she continued. "Otherwise, master had no reason to put you in the party after such a brief meeting with you. He intends to save all of us. That's why master is the best."

"W-Well..." Greg swallowed. In truth, he had been wondering how he'd managed to catch the attention of Thousand Tricks. His interaction with Krai had been very brief and not a very pleasant one. He could have imagined why Rhuda had been inducted into the party, but his own recruitment had baffled him. When Tino had waltzed into the bar, he'd even thought she'd got the wrong guy.

Tino turned from the dumbstruck Greg to the remaining two members, who looked just as stunned as he was. "Don't tell me you thought my master appointed you all at random. He would never play around like that. This whole situation is according to his meticulous calculation. As I told you, master is the best."

Greg turned to Gilbert, unable to believe his ears. Whether or not Krai *was* the best, Tino's assessment made sense—the only problem was that their impression of Krai was so grotesquely incongruent with the man that Tino described.

Greg shuddered as a certain moniker passed through his mind: Thousand Tricks, title of the Level 8 hunter whom everyone had heard of but no one knew anything about.

Rhuda timidly raised her hand. "Um, then why was I invited?"

Tino pondered the question before eyeing Rhuda up and down with disgust. Her gaze halted on Rhuda's breasts, which far outclassed her own. Despite both of them wearing similar leather jackets, Rhuda's curves had morphed her own almost into a different design. In the face of this realization, Tino looked more grave than she had while facing the phantoms.

Tino's master had told her that Rhuda was just some girl who wanted to go to the White Wolf's Den. Tino, of course, saw through this front. That was too flimsy a reason to appoint a party member for this life-threatening mission. If Krai were honest about his motivation for choosing Rhuda, then his follow-up about how "Li'l Gilbert and the Great Greg would do," would also be true. Her dear master would never do such a thing.

Much to Rhuda's confusion, Tino's gaze remained severe. Then, finally, Tino relented. "I don't know," she muttered. "Probably because of those large breasts of yours. I'll grow bigger soon enough, unlike Lizzy, who's finished growing."

Rhuda was overcome with shock. "What?" she blurted. "W-Wait, what did you say?!"

"Enough chitchat. Let's take out the boss and complete the request. I'll take the lead," Tino said.

"Hey, wait! What are you talking about?!"

Ignoring Rhuda's dismay, Tino approached the boss room.

Wolf knights were hulking phantoms—powerful, tough, and agile. Their aggressiveness made them fearsome opponents, but in terms of agility, they were far outdone by Tino.

Tino's mentor, Liz Smart, was a Thief herself, and Tino had practiced sparring against Liz countless times. After all those times of Tino being beaten up by an opponent far faster than herself, her eyes could follow the every move of the wolf knights, whose attacks were much slower than those she had faced in her training. Even if the boss were a couple steps above them, she could at least keep up with it.

The problem was whether the party could penetrate that thick, armored fur.

It wasn't normally a Thief's job to defeat phantoms. As such, most of Tino's training had been dedicated to bolstering her agility rather than training her to kill.

"I think it's alone," she said. "Let's take care of it before other phantoms arrive."

Tino's party readied themselves, their two front-liners drawing their weapons. Rhuda herself unsheathed her dagger and took a step back, ready to stand guard and fend off any intrusions. It was an important role that protected the party from being trapped between two groups of phantoms, since none of them could take on a wolf knight on their own.

"We don't know what's in there. Why don't I go first?" Gilbert suggested.

Tino took a deep breath and smiled. "Don't worry yourself. Lizzy always says the first blow sets the mood, so it's mine."

"The mood? It's the most dangerous part. Why does it matter who makes the first move?"

Tino flexed her limbs. After completing her warm-up, she nodded. "Because I'm a hunter."

With that, she darted towards the boss room.

The boss room was sizable, spanning at least ten meters in diameter. In addition to the tunnel Tino entered through, narrow openings branched off to the left and right. The ceiling was much higher than that of the rest of the den, enough to clear two wolf knights standing on top of each other. The party had descended much farther than Tino had realized.

However, even the expansive boss room seemed cramped around the enormous figure in its center: a humongous wolf wielding a crimson battle-axe as large as Tino's entire body.

The wolf itself, clad from the shoulders down, joints and all, in black plate armor, was substantially larger than the wolf knights the party had faced thus far. Combined with its towering frame, it promised an even more dangerous

battle than the party had experienced against the other wolves in the den. What made this wolf stand apart most of all, however, was its striking moon-silver fur that shone in ominous contrast to the bloodred fur of the wolf knights. Its ferocious silver face was half covered by a human skull as if to exude its revulsion for all of mankind.

The canine ears of the phantom twitched. Unhurriedly, the silver wolf knight, reminiscent of the long-extinct Silver Moons, caught Tino in its gaze. The wolf had the dignity of a king.

In the wolf's eyes, Tino saw its savage intent to maul and slaughter the intruders. The wolf howled as Tino dashed past it. Compared to this massive wolf knight, Tino was a rat scurrying past it at annoying speed.

The wolf's gaze followed, and its eyes met Tino's once again. The wolf king brought its axe around, the plates of its armor screeching from the friction. Tino steadied her breath, noting the beastly stench in the room.

Tino had expected to face a wolf completely covered in armor, but that didn't make her prospects any better. Even Tino's powerful kicks couldn't break through that armor. If she attempted a kick against those steadfast plates and injured her leg, she'd be done for. A drop in her agility now would mean certain death. With the phantom's tremendous size, Tino wasn't even confident she could knock it off-balance. Her heart tightened with trepidation and even more so by exhilaration.

The blade of the axe, at least a meter long, came rushing towards her. Battle-axes were difficult weapons to control, with most of their weight balanced towards the heads. Maintaining posture while swinging the weapon took great strength, but the wolf king had swung it as though it were a wooden stick.

With a decisive side-step, Tino dodged the blade. Like a pendulum, the axe whisked past her, severing the very air and assaulting her with a powerful gust. If a blow so forceful were to so much as graze her arm, Tino would have been knocked off her feet.

Bloodred wolf eyes brimming with curdling hatred followed Tino's movement. The looming beast turned, its mere step making the walls quake around them. Despite its size, the wolf was far from sluggish. This thing was strong.

Still shaken by the vehement attack, Tino racked her brain for a path to victory. She was confident she could flee if she wanted to. Defeating it was another story. Even Gilbert would struggle to block its battle-axe head-on, and the Purgatorial Sword would have no chance of slicing through its armor.

Tino ducked under the wolf's raised arm, slashing with her shortsword at its armored leg. In the wake of the clashing metal, only a thin scratch was left on its armor. The wolf hadn't even budged.

Worse yet, the wolf was intelligent. While its eyes, burning for violence, followed Tino, the wolf kept its guard up. Unlike with the other wolf knights they'd faced, a surprise attack wouldn't cut it.

The remainder of Tino's party ran up to the throne room and stopped when they saw the king of wolves from behind. The plan had been for Tino to keep the boss occupied so the others could attack. However, the other members saw just as plainly as Tino did that the wolf was too alert to fall for it.

Gilbert and Greg swiftly shifted gears. Drawing their swords, they split up to flank the wolf from both sides.

"What is that thing?!" Gilbert shouted, wide-eyed as he stared at the bobbing axe-head.

Greg searched frantically for an opening. "I've never seen anything like this!" he cried.

On full alert, Rhuda remained a few paces away from the action, observing the beast from head to toe.

Even as the silver wolf became surrounded by four foes, it remained unfazed, like a king standing in court.

We'll go for the head, Tino concluded. While the boss wolf was far more powerful than the ordinary wolf knight, this wolf lacked a helmet. That meant its weakness was most likely the same as its counterpart's.

The problem was that the boss was much taller than the wolves they'd previously fought. Tino would have to make a tremendous leap to reach as high as the beast's head, and during that time, she'd be defenseless. Attacking from behind wouldn't work either—the boss would simply swat them away.

Though the wolf king kept an eye on every human in the room, it devoted the majority of its attention to Tino. Its behavior displayed the wolf's almost humanlike intelligence.

"What's our move?" Gilbert asked.

"Wanna retreat?" Greg replied.

Fortunately, neither Gilbert, Greg, nor Rhuda was overcome with fear. Tino had seen their courage in action plenty of times on their way here. If her partymates had been cowards, they would have turned tail long before even entering the den. If the team had any chance of victory, it lay with that courage.

Tino alone could handle a wolf knight, but she stood no chance against this boss. But now, she had allies: party members who'd fought alongside her to bring them this far. Tino, beholding the wolf scorching with animosity, understood their ordeal for what it was: a trial.

Krai Andrey often sent clan members on trials of life or death. The Grievors called these the Thousand Trials. These trials were the first steps towards glory.

Tino knew what lay ahead of her. "Stop one blow. I'll figure it out from there."

Gilbert roared, signaling the start of the fight.

Rhuda had never experienced a more turbulent battle. The enormous battle-axe flew through the air like a tornado. Armed with the Purgatorial Sword, Gilbert parried the axe blows coming at him from above and from the sides. His knuckles grew whiter with every clash of the blade.

While Gilbert's sword was sizable in its own right, it dwarfed in comparison to the wolf king's battle-axe. The axe swings were relatively slow but incredibly powerful, inching Gilbert back as he was forced to parry.

Blocking it head-on was not an option. As reckless as Gilbert was, in his several years as a hunter, he had some experience facing enemies stronger than himself. His face was sweaty and his breathing heavy, but Gilbert managed to stand strong, deflecting deadly blow after deadly blow.

Meanwhile, Greg had been cutting and stabbing at the wolf between each of

Gilbert's parries. However, Greg's sharp attacks against the wolf's wrist, elbow, and axe haft did no more than slow the wolf for a fraction of a second.

"Dammit, its armor's too tough!" he cried.

The wolf king was not a terribly adept fighter—less skilled than the four humans opposing it, at least. Still, the beast was using its brute strength, agility, and size to overwhelm the hunters. Its whirling battle-axe flew towards Greg and Gilbert while keeping Tino, who was camped in the wolf's blind spot, at bay.

There was no doubt about it—the silver wolf knight was assessing its foes. Its priority was neither Gilbert with his greatsword nor Greg, the largest member of the party, but Tino, the slender leader of the group. Rhuda shuddered at its level of intelligence—intelligence that she'd never before seen in a phantom—but at the same time, she marveled at her partymates as they faced off against the wolf.

Tino dodged the battle-axe, avoiding it by a hair's breadth. A few strands of her sheening black hair were whisked away, severed by the blade. Sweat glistened on her face as the axe swept past, but her eyes remained open. She wasn't afraid, and Rhuda couldn't understand how that was possible.

How could Tino move like that? How could she coolly duck under an attack that could have lopped off her head if she'd moved just a moment too late? Tino wasn't all that fast. No matter how quickly she moved, she couldn't outrun the swinging axe.

As Tino danced circles around the behemoth battle-axe and the looming threat of violent death, Rhuda saw true courage in Tino. She was moved by it. Having worked solo up until now, she had never witnessed a superior Thief in action, save at the Association training grounds. Even then, she had witnessed talent but nothing that had moved her to the core. Something about Tino, in the way she refused to back down from such a fearsome foe, resonated with Rhuda in the way that nothing else had.

A Thief's job wasn't to fight. In fact, Tino joining combat at all might have been a mistake. Even still, Rhuda shuddered with overwhelming admiration for the girl a little younger than herself.

“Dammit! He’s not slowing down!” Gilbert growled through gritted teeth, having deflected countless strikes from the axe.

Phantoms, like people, had limited stamina, but the wolf’s blows showed no sign of abating. With every parry, Gilbert’s arms suffered unimaginable strain. If his sword hadn’t been a Relic, it would have long been shattered.

Violent clashes of metal on metal reverberated through the dimly lit cave. Gilbert and Greg dogged the battle-axe after every swing. It was a close battle, but even Rhuda could tell from afar that the wolf king had a leg up on them. It was a miracle that none of them had sustained any serious wounds. But miracles don’t last forever.

“What?” someone exclaimed.

A metallic crunch was followed by half of a blade flying into the air. With wide eyes, Gilbert and Tino followed the blade, but Greg was even more surprised than they were. He held one half of his longsword in his hand. The other half clattered to the ground nearby.

Rhuda and the silver wolf were the first to react.

Time slowed to a crawl. Rhuda saw the wolf’s muzzle contort into a sinister grin, the creature’s eyes set on Greg. The battle-axe rose high into the air.

Out of instinct, Rhuda threw her dagger, which flew towards the wolf’s face. It was a spur-of-the-moment action. Even if the dagger had struck the wolf king, the human skull it wore and its thick fur would have prevented the dagger from leaving a scratch.

However, the wolf knight reacted keenly to the projectile. Tilting the battle-axe, it deflected the dagger, gaining the humans a split-second—enough time for Gilbert to snap out of his astonishment and meet the plunging battle-axe.

Parrying the axe would send it into Greg, so Gilbert blocked the blade straight-on, exerting every drop of his strength to hold the blade at bay. The struggle lasted for only a moment before Gilbert’s knees buckled, and he was sent flying backward. However, he’d bought them another second.

By the time the axe fell again, Rhuda had sprinted across the room. She couldn’t abstain from fighting when the party needed her the most. The blade

of the axe swept over Rhuda's back, splitting the air where Greg had stood only a moment before. The blade made a loud *boom* as it pierced deep into the ground. Greg and Rhuda tumbled to the ground, rolling over to face the wolf king. They were now completely vulnerable and would have been goners if Tino hadn't jumped in.

The Thief was already in the air, having leapt from the butt of the axe before the wolf could lift it.



Shock mired the loathing expression on the wolf knight's face. The king made a split-second decision, releasing the axe in its left paw to swat at Tino, who was already above the boss's head. The wolf's claw extended towards the soaring girl, catching her right leg.

Tino's face contorted in pain as blood sprayed from the shallow cut. Even so, her flight continued, as she soared in an arc over the wolf knight until she landed on the beast's back. The crimson shortsword gleamed in her hand as the wolf-man squirmed. Then, without so much as a cry, she swiftly thrust the sword into the phantom's neck.

The beast's massive frame jerked upward. Its bloodshot eyes rolled into its head, and its arms flailed blindly in an attempt to snatch Tino. But in the end, its claws never landed. The wolf crumbled to its knees. Once Tino had let go of its back and landed safely on the ground, the hulking phantom turned to dust.

"Did we do it?" Gilbert muttered in disbelief, his shoulders rising and falling with his heavy breaths. For the first time since embarking on this quest, he sounded as young as he looked. With a heavy clang, the Purgatorial Sword fell to the ground.

"We won..." Tino declared in a monotone voice, holding her sliced right thigh. She sat on the ground, inspecting the long cut across her fair skin. The claw, as sharp as any sword, had luckily missed her arteries, but she couldn't let it go untreated.

Tino let out a short sigh, clenching her teeth to bear the dull pain accompanied by trickling blood. "It was a close call," she said.

If she hadn't finished off the wolf king when she did, the injury would have prevented her from running, let alone defeating the beast.

She reached towards her belt for a potion pack that held five vials, and plucked one filled with a pink liquid. It was a healing potion created by an Alchemist. These potions, created through a combination of magic and science, instantly healed injuries, although they weren't as potent as a Cleric's healing spell. Potions like these were must-haves in a party without a healer.

Tino popped the cap off the vial, pulled on her shorts to expose her thigh, and poured the liquid over the cut. She groaned at the sting, but the wound that ran almost the entire length of her thigh soon closed.

Greg sat up, taking in the broken sword he still held in his hand. The color drained from his face as what had happened finally sank in. “Damn, I thought for sure I was dead. Just my luck that my sword broke at a time like this, though.”

“You’re pretty lucky to be alive, old man,” Gilbert said.

Greg forced a laugh. “You can say that again.” With a forced smile, he turned to Rhuda. “You really saved my skin, kiddo.”

“Naw. I’m just glad I got to you just in time. Are you all right, Tino?” Rhuda asked, turning to her fellow Thief.

“I’m good. I can still walk. Time will heal it.”

Tino’s potion was an expensive item that could heal most nonlethal wounds given time. Wiping the blood from her leg, Tino rose slowly to her feet.

Gilbert sighed in relief at seeing his leader unharmed. Their enemy was more fearsome than anything he had faced before. If he had been with his old party, there would be little chance of him surviving the battle, even if his sword had been fully charged. The fact that they’d come out on top while pretty much unscathed was nothing short of a miracle. Doing so would have been impossible without everyone in the party working together.

Now that the threat had passed, fear of death rushed over Gilbert. He slowly exhaled, trying to steady his heartbeat. “Even the boss leaves nothing behind, huh?”

“Tough luck for us,” Greg answered, conflicted. “Bosses are way more likely to drop stuff than other phantoms are.” He retrieved the end of his trusty sword and carefully sheathed both halves.

Reforging a sword snapped in two was difficult and unwise. Smelting both halves was the best Greg could do, which would leave him in the red after the mission’s meager pay.

Rhuda forced a smile. “On the bright side, you’re alive. You can always buy another sword.”

“Yeah. Can’t argue with that.”

“Here,” Tino said, presenting Greg with the crimson shortsword. “It’s shorter than yours, but it should be better than nothing.”

“Thanks.” He took the sword and tested its weight by flourishing it a few times.

The party had defeated the boss, but they were yet to meet their objective. Even then, they would have to make it back out of the vault alive. Unlike monsters, phantoms materialized out of mana material, so even the path they’d taken to get there could be repopulated before they made it out.

Greg and Gilbert sat on the ground, exhausted, gulping down the contents of their canteens.

Rhuda, meanwhile, began recalling the fight. “With a boss like that, the lost hunters are still in danger.”

Greg blinked for a moment. “Huh? Oh, yeah, the Level 5s, right? The boss probably got them.”

“Level 5...” Tino frowned.

The wolf king had been formidable, even more so than in the worst-case scenario Tino had imagined before their arrival. With three Level 4s and a Level 3 in the party, they had barely squeezed in a victory, though that was partially down to Gilbert and Greg outperforming Tino’s expectations. If she’d faced the boss alone, she might have died. There was a chance that Level 5 hunters could have lost.

Since levels were merely assigned by the Association, the difference between Levels 4 and 5 was largely insignificant. Higher levels like 7 or 8 could only be achieved by leaving a legacy of extraordinary treasure hunting, but achieving Level 5 required no more combat strength than that required for reaching Level 4.

Tino reevaluated the boss room. It was spacious, with a high ceiling, and

illuminated by the glowing stones embedded in the walls. The stones were enough to dimly light the ground, but Tino saw no blood or any other sign of the lost hunters.

Since the White Wolf's Den wasn't too expansive, it was hard to imagine the hunters going missing without a trace. Even if they'd been struggling to fight through the phantoms, Level 5 hunters would have left behind some sort of sign or marker for the rescue party, but there was nothing at all.

Tino thought some more, reminding herself that this was a trial—one that her master saw fit for her to undertake. With that in mind, she concluded this had to be a mystery that even she could solve.

"Master, I don't understand..." she whispered.

Just then, she heard a sound. As she looked up to identify it, the rest of the party noticed her expression.

"What's up, chief?" Greg asked.

"Get up. Something's coming," said Tino.

"Is it more phantoms?" Greg asked.

Tino's party members forced themselves to their feet, pulling themselves back from the brink of exhaustion.

Something came flying through the air, which Tino dodged with a half step. A long crimson arrow flew past, piercing the wall behind her. For the first time since entering the dungeon, Tino grew pale.

"What the...?" Gilbert muttered.

There, blocking the path they'd taken into the boss room, stood a silver wolf knight clad in black plate armor. Except, it wasn't just one. Four pairs of bloodred eyes glared at Tino and her party.

Had the boss they'd just defeated been waiting for reinforcements? The thought crossed Tino's mind. In hindsight, the phantom had seemed too careful, as if it had been trying to buy time.

The earth shook as the four wolf-men marched towards them.

Greg's lips trembled at the nightmare before him. "This is impossible..."

Each wolf knight looked identical to the one they had just defeated, except for the type of weapon each of them held: a greatsword, a humongous club that nearly reached the ceiling, a bow clearly not meant to be used in a cave, and a gun that trailed a coil of ammo across the ground, indicating its rapid-fire capabilities.

The wolves didn't rush in, but seemed to relish in their display of superiority. Still, their eyes burned just as fiercely as the eyes of the first boss.

Rhuda trembled. "How is this happening? We just defeated it."

"Was that thing now the boss?" Gilbert asked.

They already knew that, in theory, a treasure vault could hold more than one boss. Even so, they hadn't expected this.

"Master, this is too much. I can't take it."

Tino couldn't believe it. Sure, her trial had gone more smoothly than other trials thus far, but she saw no way out against this.

Stunned, Tino brushed her finger along her injured thigh. There was still some pain, and she couldn't be as agile as she'd been before. If her wound reopened in the midst of battle, the party would be done for.

The silver wolf knights stood in formation, dwarfing the humans by comparison. The greatsword and club wielders stood the closest, followed by the wolves wielding the bow and the gun. In contrast to the thoughtless behavior of the crimson wolf knights, the silver wolves' disciplined movements rivaled those of the imperial army.

Greg readied his crimson shortsword, looking frail in the face of the towering wolves. "What do we do?"

Gilbert pointed the Purgatorial Sword in the direction of the bosses, his usual dauntlessness nowhere to be found. "What can we do?"

The party looked to their leader.

Tino maintained her calm facade. It was her job to make the tough decisions. If she crumbled now, the whole party would fall apart. There was no one Tino

herself could turn to. “We have to do it,” she said in a hushed voice.

The wound on Tino’s leg wasn’t overly deep, but running wasn’t an option. If they did, the pair of long-ranged weapons the wolves possessed guaranteed that they’d be shot in the back. Tino was fast, but she couldn’t move faster than a flying bullet, nor could she take down the two wolf knights with the bow and gun at the same time. Still, she couldn’t give up. She had to fight. She had to live. Tino carried the weight of her party members’ lives on her shoulders.

Tino wrangled her spirit away from the brink of despair, her heart drumming under a different kind of tension than she usually felt in combat.

They couldn’t take them all out. They had to find the best way to survive. The only thing that kept Tino going was her trust in her master. She knew he would never leave her with an impossible challenge, and that was the one thought keeping her sane.

Keeping her attention on the wolf knights, Tino glanced at the tunnel to the right, which also led out of the boss room. The silver wolves were even bigger than the wolf knights and would be inhibited by the low and narrow corridor.

Steadying her breath, Tino called to her party, calming her trembling comrades. “We can’t take them on in here. There’s too much space. We have to make it to the passage to the right. In there, we can face fewer at a time, and the sword and club will get caught on the walls and ceiling. I’ll take the rear.”

And so, their desperate battle began.

Thunderous howls shook the room. The harmony of the four wolves could be equated to a physical attack. The humans leaned forward to endure the sound waves.

The movements of the four silver wolves were chillingly calculated. Perhaps they understood that their kin had been vanquished by the humans before them. As if to trap the party, the wolves shifted their formation to block off the boss room exits.

As the wolf with the club moved to block the path to the right, Gilbert took a step towards it. Since defeating them all at once would be impossible, being

trapped in this space meant certain death. As if to scare his hopelessness away, he bellowed and swung the Purgatorial Sword.

Not one hint of his tiredness showed in his blow. In fact, this might have been the sharpest swing of the sword he'd shown that day. A flicker of flame rose on the thick crimson blade. Gilbert had instinctively poured a breath of magic into his sword. The flaming blade was strong enough to slice through metal armor.

The silver wolf knight swiped its club. The destructive force of the blow struck Gilbert's sword and sent him flying. Rhuda cried out as his body tumbled across the ground.

Fortunately, he was still conscious. Gilbert rose to his feet, all hope drained from within him. "I can't parry that!"

The blow was just too powerful—too immense to block or repel. With his sword out of mana, Gilbert couldn't even attempt to cut through the club.

Shortsword in hand, Greg sprinted towards the same wolf knight. The wolf brought its club back up. A gust of wind rushed at Greg, and he dived backward as the spiked pillar rushed before his eyes.

The club carried even more mass than the battle-axe. With a casual swing of the giant weapon, the wolf would tear through leather armor and the hunter beneath it. Greg doubted that a set of metal armor would give any greater protection.

Rhuda drew another dagger and threw it. There was no longer time to watch from afar.

The wolf with the greatsword howled and took a step forward. Tino, in a deadly gambit, ran straight towards it. She sidestepped just in time to avoid the blade swinging down from overhead, then leapt back to once again avoid the sword as the wolf swiped up with it. While the greatsword moved faster than the battle-axe, Tino could still dodge it, but one hit from the thing would slice her to pieces.

Her eyes met the wolf's. She couldn't see a path to victory. Now that she'd given her shortsword to Greg, there was no way for her to damage them. She drew her dagger but doubted it could pierce their hide at all.

As the team steeled themselves, Tino racked her brain. There had to be a way to complete her master's trial. She considered drawing fire from the bow and gun wolves to make them shoot each other, but it wasn't possible. Neither wolf showed any sign of attacking, either to avoid that very tactic or out of confidence that their two wolf brethren were enough to take care of the humans. That said, they didn't have to defeat them. Their first step was to get out of the boss room.

Tino weaved through the flashes of the blade, her wounded thigh aching. She noted that the wolf knight with the metal-coated club was much slower than the wolf with the greatsword. Perhaps she and Rhuda could make it past the club wielder, leaving the men behind. The thought was immediately dropped from her mind. There was no time. As soon as she stopped diverting the attention of the wolf with the greatsword, the wolf would kill Greg and Gilbert before she could take out the club wielder from behind. Tino's offensive capabilities were simply too insufficient.

The wolf knight with the club stood on guard, keeping Gilbert and Greg back. Gilbert occasionally ventured an attack, but those attacks were always met with calm parries without retaliation. Tino wondered if the wolf was ensuring they didn't get past it into the corridor, or if the wolves were trying to wear her out before making their move. Either way, the wolf knights were frighteningly thorough, despite their obvious advantage.

Tino's entire body felt like it was on fire. She knew she couldn't hold up her dodging much longer. The more time passed, the worse their predicament became, but what could they do? She desperately racked her brain for answers.

"Run, Tino! We'll hold them off!" Gilbert shouted, his sword pointed at the towering wolf. He full well knew what that meant for him.

Greg bitterly agreed. "That's our only option. Dammit, it's just my luck."

At times, hunters were faced with impossible choices. Sometimes, sacrificing friends was the only way to survive.

"Run for it, Tino, Rhuda," Greg added. "Do whatever it takes to escape. You gotta tell the Association what's happening down here."

"No..." Tino started.

Greg continued, dead serious. “Go, before we’re all toast. Hey, don’t sweat it. Happens all the time. Today, it’s our turn. It’s just tough luck, that’s all.” He chuckled. His tone made it clear that he held no grudge towards Tino. “Guess I should have trained a little harder.”

The wolf knights, as if they understood human conversation, sprang into action. The bow and gun were raised, aimed at the party. Every shot had the ability to snipe a life away.

Was that the only way? Had her master not expected this? As Tino became lost in those whirling thoughts, the sounds of battle grew distant.

Grieving Souls was one of those rare parties that had never lost a member. That was one of the many reasons Tino worshipped them. Would the same Krai that had kept his entire party alive all these years force such a cruel ultimatum on Tino? No. She knew that many hunters were forced to make those choices, but that wasn’t the case today.

She returned to the world. The wolf’s greatsword carved a line into the ground beside her. A pair of crimson eyes gleamed with irritation. At that moment, Tino heard her dear master in her mind.

“It’s nothing special, but it’s all yours.”

Krai had said those words when she had proudly displayed the ring she’d taken from Gilbert at the recruitment event. Then it clicked. That was it. She knew what to do. Tino glanced at her left hand. She would go for the wolf knight’s eyes. Even the wolves’ thick hide and armor left their eyes unguarded.

Attacking the eyes of a powerful monster or phantom was pretty standard. She only hadn’t considered it until now because she’d thought she had no means of doing so. The wolf knights were more than twice Tino’s height. She could neither safely reach their eyes nor attack long-range, but now...

A glimmer of gold shone on her left ring finger. It was the Shooting Ring her master had given her. While Tino owned no Relic of her own, she had acquired enough knowledge of them through her conversations with Krai. Shooting Rings were an unpopular Relic, only because of how weak their magic bullets were. They certainly weren’t powerful enough to take out a wolf knight.

Tino retreated back to avoid the swipe of the greatsword as she moved the ring from her left ring finger to her right forefinger. She could feel that the ring was charged.

Normally, learning to use a Relic took grueling training. Even a Shooting Ring wasn't so easy to wield for a person without experience. Tino, however, had once practiced using one at a Relic shop she had accompanied her master to upon his recommendation. The situation almost seemed orchestrated. Tino simply had to will it to fire.

"Hey, Tino!" Greg cried, imploring for a decision.

"We aim for the eyes," came her reply.

Firing a Shooting Ring required much less movement than firing an arrow or a gun, let alone throwing a dagger. Even if the Shooting Ring couldn't take out a wolf, if she could blind one, they had a chance of making it into the corridor. Of course, the wolves wouldn't let them pass without a fight. The whole party needed to work together.

"I'll do it. Back me up," Tino said.

Although there was no verbal response, Tino was in sync with her party. Gilbert and Greg dashed to either side of the clubbed wolf, alarming it.

This plan was more precarious than the one before. Tino would not get a second shot. Still dodging the greatsword attacks purely on practiced reflex, she turned her attention to the club-wielding wolf, which stood outside of her field of vision. Once she had him in her sights, she controlled her breathing and concentrated. She couldn't miss.

Gilbert swung his greatsword, roaring as he attacked. Greg swung at the wolf knight as it moved to counter. In the same instant, Rhuda took a breath and released her dagger. It spun towards the wolf's eye. The club-wielding wolf knight didn't so much as block the dagger. It merely closed its eyes. As the dagger bounced off the wolf's eyelids and fell to the ground, Rhuda watched the wolf's muzzle twist in derision.

When the wolf opened its eyes, it caught sight of the ball of blue light inches from it. The wolf knight froze, unable to react to the perfectly timed projectile.

The magic bullet pierced the wolf's eye.

With a howl, the wolf dropped its club, the resulting impact shaking the earth. By the time the club hit the ground, the party was sprinting for the exit.

Tino dove past the greatsword. Rhuda and Greg made a run for it. Then Tino saw her remaining party member.

"Gilbert, no!" she cried.

Was Gilbert acting on instinct? Did he see this as an opportunity? Or had Tino been too short-worded with her order? In any case, Gilbert wasn't running for the tunnel. He had swung his sword at the blinded wolf.

Tino's cry drained Gilbert of all expression. There was no way to stop his sword now that it was swinging upward to slice the wolf in half. With its arm, the wolf parried the blade. A clash of metal echoed in the room, leaving the wolf's wrist guard greatly dented but unpenetrated.

In a rage, the wolf snapped out of its stasis. It flailed its arms blindly, striking Greg and sending him across the room. There was no longer an opening.

The beast rose to its feet. With its crimson eyes, it glowered at Tino, completely unaffected by the magic bullet. It was no use. The same tactic wouldn't work twice.

Tino faltered, dodging the greatsword out of reflex by diving to one side. She was all out of stamina. With a little bit of respite, she could recover, but the wolves wouldn't be so courteous.

"I... I'm sorry!" Gilbert exclaimed.

Tino didn't blame him, though. Their position would have greatly improved if he had succeeded, and she hadn't been explicit enough in her instruction. It could have gone either way.

As the wolf reached for its club, Gilbert slashed the creature as if to make up for his mistake—as if to offer the rest of the party a chance to escape. Greg rose to his feet and joined the attack.

Sensing a desperate final stand from the humans, the wolf knights howled. Now they knew what the party was after. Bow and gun were pointed at the

entrance to the tunnel. Even if they made it inside, they likely wouldn't survive the volley. They were finally cornered, with no schemes left up their sleeve and almost no stamina and mental fortitude left to fight.

What were their chances of escaping alive? How likely was it for them to take out all four phantoms here and now? Both options seemed hopeless, yet Tino wondered which she should choose.

She met Rhuda's eyes. The newbie Thief's once cheerful face was now marred with her weariness. Everyone in the party, including Tino, was on the brink of collapse as they faced these enemies more fearsome than anything they'd faced before, with close to no chance of escape.

Tino recalled her mentor's teaching. What should she do? Her heart thumped as the words came to her without her effort. Her mentor had repeated them many times: *"Kill or get killed."*

"I can't, Lizzy," Tino whimpered in defeat as she realized the fruitlessness of her mentor's advice.

At that moment, as if on cue, something mowed down one of the wolf knights.

Chapter Four: Thousand Tricks

“I’ve got it, Krai. You just need an arsenal of powerful Relics.”

“Luke, all the gear in the world won’t save me if I don’t have the talent to use them.”

A conversation I’d once had with Luke was replaying in my mind. At the speed I was flying, even a hunter hardened with mana material wouldn’t have survived a crash. In my heart of hearts, I knew I was a dead man.

I’m gonna die! I’m gonna die, dammit!

The White Wolf’s Den was much larger than I’d expected any monster den to be, but the passages were far too narrow for me to fly around with the unstoppable Night Hiker.

The regular placement of the luminous stones was enough to light my way through the dark cave, enhanced by the Owl’s Eye—a Relic that granted night vision—on my right thumb. It was a silver lining, but a thin one against the towering storm cloud I faced.

I would come rushing towards a wall every few seconds, forcing me to turn by yanking on my coat. This dark and gloomy cavern was a place I never would have set foot in under normal circumstances. Now, the only thought on my mind was how to stop myself from moving. I’d brought a map of the vault with me, but by this point, I had no idea where I was.

There was no tight steering when it came to the Night Hiker, so the whole way I was being slammed against the wall, ceiling, and ground. My vision shook. I felt like a rubber ball, barely aware of where I was going.

My face was rigid with effort. In hindsight, I should have done everything in my power to stop before entering the vault. I’d let the rush of high-speed flight get to me, and now I was gonna barf, with only myself to blame.

I whipped past a giant phantom blocking most of the corridor. There was little wonder how the phantom couldn’t catch me, when I barely knew my trajectory.

By the time the thing noticed me, I was whizzing over its head, telling myself that I was certainly not flying over a bipedal wolf.

Where is Tino?!

Unlike phantoms, hunters left behind corpses when they died. Even if Tino's party had lost, there was no chance the phantoms had lapped up every bone and drop of blood of their frail human bodies. That's what I thought, anyway. At the very least, my piss-poor vision didn't spot any corpses that might have belonged to Tino and her merry gang. It was unlikely that they had met their ends.

If Tino and company hadn't left the capital at all, I would have been a complete laughingstock. Tino had a strong moral compass (unlike me), so I didn't expect her to ditch the quest altogether, but being Liz's apprentice, she did have a manipulative side. There was a chance that—

My head smacked against the ceiling, hard but painlessly, making me see stars. The wolflike phantom at the end of the straight corridor spotted the incoming human missile and stared wide-eyed.

In an instant, I shot past it. Along the way, my shoulder bashed the side of its head, sending me hurtling into the opposite wall. Though I was temporarily shaken, I still somehow managed to make the tight curve ahead, scraping along the cave wall. That I hadn't already splattered against a wall along the way was pretty much a miracle. Well, using a separate Relic to help me steer did help a bit. Thank goodness for Relics!

My luck wouldn't last forever, though. If I didn't find a way to land soon, I'd be as dead as a doornail. Then I'd be remembered for all eternity as the dumbass who crash-landed in a treasure vault, like a "Human Missile" incident part two. I couldn't bear the thought. Not even I deserved an ending that pathetic.

No, my mind was made up. I'd have to stop—someday, somehow.

Before I knew it, the corridor had widened around me as I rapidly approached the back of an enormous phantom. With my life on the line, I made the critical decision to make that phantom my landing pad. All I had to do was commit. I hugged my head, closed my eyes, and prayed for my life.

The most brutal impact of the day so far rattled me to the core.

I came to, and the twinkling in my eyes slowly faded as I recovered from the collision. It looked like I'd survived the landing. Lowering my arms from my head, I realized that I was already standing. Despite the knockout impact, I'd somehow escaped without a scratch—except that my equilibrium was out of whack. I nearly barfed trying to adjust to solid ground, but I somehow held it in.

I shook my head to keep myself from blacking out again. Even after avoiding the front lines like the plague for years, I hadn't forgotten that when a hunter lost their consciousness in a vault, they lost their life with it.

Dusting off my shoulders, I heaved a heavy sigh. My heart was still hammering a frantic drum solo, threatening to explode in my chest if I didn't calm myself soon. My face was frozen solid, but after seeing my life flash before my eyes, I took my mild symptoms as a win.

The Night Hiker was a defective Relic—and a deadly one, at that. The inventor must have had as many screws loose in their head as my friends did in theirs. How was braking not the first thing on the inventor's mind?

The phantom that had unknowingly volunteered to be my landing pad had impaled the cave wall, head first. Apparently, there hadn't only been one phantom there though, but two. The pair of them were in a heap, completely immobile.

No Level 3 phantom could have survived a human missile to the back. Its thick black armor was dented and cracked. By the wall lay a giant bow and sword that must have belonged to the mysterious phantoms.

I say "mysterious" because these phantoms were of a completely different shape, size, and color than the ones I had expected. The phantoms in this vault were supposed to be ordinary wolves, but the ones piled on the ground were clad in steadfast armor rivaling that of high-ranking knights. That sure was a surprise, and not the fun kind.

Back in the day, when I'd been dragged against my will into a Level 3 vault, the phantoms had seemed significantly weaker than these. Then again, maybe

things had changed in the years I'd thrown in the towel. It was also possible that these phantoms only *looked* deadly, but I was ready to barf anyway.

At last, I decided to take in my surroundings as they became clearer. During my crash landing, I hadn't had time to take in that I was standing in a chamber more spacious than the passage. The ceiling was extraordinarily high for a cave in an underground den, and the walls and floor were extraordinarily smooth to have been dug out by wolves. The space would have been quite the sight if it weren't for the lack of windows and light, and if we did away with the phantoms.

Then I spotted a familiar face framed by ruffled black hair—the pale face of a girl who wasn't visibly injured but looked disheveled compared to how she'd looked when I'd pawned off the quest on her. Tino was standing there, having survived the miserable mission I had unknowingly thrust into her charge. She and the rest of her party were staring at me, bewildered and out of breath. Most importantly, all of them were alive.

“Master?!”

“There you are, Tino,” I said casually.

Score!

Wait a minute. There you are? Out of my confusion, I was acting nonchalantly, but my actions definitely called for a proper apology. Even though Tino seemed unharmed, all color had drained from her expression. She seemed more weary than I'd ever seen her. Taking on this Level 3 vault had clearly taken a great toll on her. The time had finally come for me to premiere my signature move: my spectacular knack for groveling. I could only laugh at this point.

As I stood there grinning, Gilbert snapped me out of my thoughts. “T-Turn around, old man!” he yelled. “Behind you!”

“What?”

Old man? The fact that I wanted to tell Li'l Gilbert to watch his mouth was a testament to how long I'd gone without seeing combat. No respectable hunter would let his guard down in a treasure vault.

I leisurely spun around like a brain-dead fool, to find a colossal phantom

identical to the one that had cushioned my crash. My cowardly instincts immediately kicked in, making me hug the wall. Upon closer inspection of the scene, another phantom, holding a ridiculously large club, stood over Li'l Gilbert. Accounting for the pair that was still on the ground, that brought the total of these enormous phantoms to four.

Now that I wasn't actively crashing into one of them, I could see that the phantoms had wolf heads, the right half of which was covered by a human skull. Their bloodred eyes gleamed in the dim light, eyeing the unmannerly intruder. The wolves' shoulders rose and fell in time to heavy breaths, and viscous drool dripped off of their muzzles.

If I'd still been an active hunter, I would have fallen to my knees and barfed my guts out at the mere look of those eyes. However, since I'd been so long detached from the dangers of hunting, another thought occupied my mind.

Huh. Do Level 3 phantoms really get this big nowadays? Times have changed. I can't imagine what sort of nightmare fuel spawns in Level 8 vaults. Good thing I stopped putting my ass on the line. Past me sure was brilliant, like he was a genius strategist, or something.

The wolf with the massive gun growled at my smirking mug and took a step back. Then the phantom with the club that had been looming over Li'l Gilbert shifted to protect its comrade. They were sniffing the air and eyeing me cautiously.

My grinning faded as reality finally set in. I was more than likely seconds away from meeting my maker. For whatever reason, the wolves hadn't attacked me yet, but I didn't stand a chance against phantoms that had put Tino in such a miserable state. I mean, what the hell was I gonna do?

As I frantically searched my brain for any chance of weaseling my way out of this, the Great Greg piped up in terror. "Th-That can't be... The bosses... They're scared!"

Come again?

"Scared?" I repeated. How ridiculous. If they were wolves, I was a sheep—a lamb ready for the slaughter. Most of the mana material I'd once built up had fizzled out of me, and the only thing this little lamb had going for it was its

hunter level stamped on paper.

I was just standing there, unsure what was going on, and yet the wolf knights took another step back. Their noses were twitching furiously as their eyes were glued on me. What were they so afraid of? The Great Greg had to be way more intimidating.

Following the wolves' gazes, I finally noticed what they were looking at. Those crimson eyes weren't pointed at my face, but at the metallic capsule dangling from my neck—the capsule that contained Sitri's slime.

I took one step forward. The wolf knights took one step back. Their eyes were frozen in my direction, but they weren't looking at me. *What the hell's inside to make them so scared?* I wondered. What in the world was I wearing around my neck?

I took another step forward, and the beasts took another two steps back. They were convinced this sheep was poisonous. My luck had turned. Apparently, I wasn't gonna die down there after all.

Without taking my eyes off the wolf knights, I called behind me. "Can you run, Tino?" Under my cool exterior, my heart was violently beating against my chest.

"Ah, yes, of course!" Tino replied, breaking free from her trance.

Three passages led out of the chamber, one of which was blocked by the wolves before me. We had no chance of making it past both of them at once. No matter how frightened they were, there was no guarantee that the wolves wouldn't soon conclude the poison vial around my neck was worth the risk. The best move was to retreat for now and get Tino and her party to rest up before breaking out of this place together.

"That way." I pointed to the passage to the right, which was the closest one to us. Now that the wolf with the club had stepped aside, the route was free for our taking.

"Um, master, shouldn't we defeat them?" Tino whined, sounding apologetic.

Of course, Tino, I wanted to say. We totally should take them down...but how the hell do you expect me to do that?!

I could have thrown the slime capsule at them and prayed they died, but betting our lives on a slime I had no knowledge about was far too risky. Since the thing was a good enough deterrent in the capsule, I would keep taking advantage of that fact.

I sighed and adopted a wise tone. “Don’t lose sight of what’s important, Tino.”

“Oh! You mean...”

That’s right. The most important thing was her life. Battles of life or death were stupid. More power to those who risked their lives like that, but count me out.

Just then, I heard movement from somewhere. Tino gasped. Before I knew it, all I could see was pitch-black armor towering over me. One of the wolf knights had recovered from my crash landing and leapt up to me. By the time I realized what had happened, a sword longer than I was tall came rushing down.

My senses were overwhelmed by the wrathful howl and beastly stench. I simply stood there, frozen, unable to move a muscle. The sword came down like a guillotine, heavy and fast enough to split me clean in two—before striking me and bouncing off me without leaving a mark.

“What the...?” the Great Greg muttered.

The wolf knight that had attacked me stared in surprise. It stumbled back a few steps and inspected the greatsword in its hands, apparently too surprised to burn in hate.

A powerful arrow was loosed with what sounded like cannon fire, to strike me on the forehead and be deflected in the same way.

Apparently, both of the phantoms I’d crashed into were very much alive. And very pissed. I would be too, if some bozo had tackled me from behind and knocked me into a wall.

All four wolf knights glared down at me. I forced a smile. Hey, what else could I have done? I was as good as dead. But then I finally thought of a way to fight back. I stuck out my index finger, pointing it at the wolves like a gun, and activated the Shock-Shooting Ring on my left pinkie. A ball of blue light burned

at my fingertip, forming a magic bullet.



Just before firing the bullet, I cracked a badass one-liner: “Nice try, but I’ve got seventeen lives.”

Humans were weak. Physically speaking, we were like the frailest creatures our size. The human body wasn’t built to survive harsh treasure vaults and fight the monsters and phantoms within them. Therefore, to make a living as a hunter, humans must be endowed with some kind of natural talent.

The treasure hunting industry boasted an abundance of natural talent. Chief among these talents was the possession of a high rate of mana material intake. Hence, there was never an overabundance of hunters, even in our day and age, when treasure hunters were worshipped by the public.

Unfortunately for me, I had only realized that *after* becoming a hunter. The silver lining was that all of my friends made up for the raw natural talent I lacked. They were talented enough to blow through most treasure vaults without my help. The wealth and reputation that our party had accumulated made me suck a little less as a hunter—that is, thanks to those spoils, I had survived this long without any talent, guts, motivation, goals, hope, or luck.

Safety Rings, like Shooting Rings, were well-known ring-type Relics. When its wearer was attacked, a Safety Ring automatically deployed a barrier of a set strength for a set amount of time. Long story short, each of them protected the wearer from an attack, one time only.

The strength and duration of the barrier depended on the ring. The stronger and longer-lasting the barrier was, the rarer and more expensive the ring. Since I wanted to avoid dying at all cost, I had—for a small fortune worth enough to buy the clan HQ several times over—bought every single Safety Ring on the market. As a result, I had a whopping *seventeen* rings on me.

I doubted that anyone else in the capital wore anything close to that number of Safety Rings. Normally, they could only be found on the fingers of top-tier hunters who wore them in case of emergencies. Naturally, I only had ten fingers, but they worked just as well in my pouch. Heck, without them, I would have never so much as touched the Night Hiker.

Safety Rings weren't infallible, of course. The barrier they produced only lasted for a second at most—usually for a fraction of that. A single activation drained every drop of a ring's mana, reducing the Relic to an ordinary hunk of jewelry. Since my own rings had protected me along the way from being splattered against the cave walls, I was sure I'd be squashed flat after a few wolf knight clobberings. Ergo, I'd have to get out of there at all costs before that happened. My having seventeen lives had been a teensy bit of an exaggeration.

The wolf knight with the greatsword reacted swiftly to the magic bullet, ducking just enough so it whizzed above its head. It was as though it had seen the bullet coming. That didn't sit right with me.

"It dodged it!" Rhuda shouted.

Then the blue light doubled back on its trajectory, striking the wolf in the back of its head. As the phantom was knocked to the ground, the cave shook from the sound of the impact. That had definitely taken the other wolves by surprise.

Keeping my eyes on the pack, I shouted, "Run, Tino!"

"O-Okay!" Tino burst into a sprint, followed by the rest of her party.

The wolf knights kept their full attention on me, choosing not to hound the others.

A Shooting Ring was any ring Relic that fired magic bullets. The Shock-Shooting Ring, for example, could—at max charge—fire up to seven bullets that would explode upon impact. However, although the explosion looked flashy, that was pretty much all it did. In fact, it inflicted little to no damage at all. The wolf knight on the ground was probably just dazed from the surprise attack.

There was a great variety of Shooting Rings out there, but none of them were powerful enough to take out a phantom. At best, they could be used to make a diversion.

The prone wolf pushed itself up. As expected, the magic bullet hadn't left a scratch. The wolves shifted to form a semicircle around me, two in the front and two in the back, which was a pretty orderly move for Level 3 wolves. I watched them rearrange themselves and scowled at the gun-bearing wolf, which I had blissfully been ignoring up to this point. That thing was no joke. My

bag of Safety Rings wouldn't do squat against rapid fire.

The wolves' fear of Sitri's slime had been overcome by their rage. Their eyes now glowed with one part fear, three parts rage, three parts hatred, and three parts wariness, if I had to throw some numbers around.

First and foremost, I had to buy Tino enough time to get away. Once I was alone against the wolves, I could fly away if I had to. Thinking that flashing a weapon should keep them at bay a little longer, I maintained my stupid grin and reached for the sword Relic on my back...but it wasn't there.

I kept reaching for the sword but only found my crossbow Relic: Never Miss a Shot 9000. The crossbow allowed me to control the trajectory of any flying object I shot, including me wearing the Night Hiker, and the magic bullet I'd just fired. It's worth noting that I'd named the Relic myself, and it didn't actually have the accuracy to guarantee the object it controlled would hit its target.

Don't tell me I dropped it, I thought. I had a sheath strapped to my back, but it held no sword. I replayed my journey to this point, but I couldn't even recall when I'd lost it, since I'd been so frantically trying to minimize my crashes against the cave walls. It was an expensive Relic too, not that it possessed any ability that would get me out of this pickle.

At least the wolf knights were staying where they were, wary of my incoherent movements.

"Master, what are you doing?" Tino, whom I thought was running for her life, was watching me from the corridor. The rest of her party were standing beside her, apparently waiting for me. What part of "run" was so hard for them to get through their skulls?! What was I doing? That's what I wanted to know! Dropping a Relic in a treasure vault was beyond unlucky. It was moronic. I was no badass, just a total dumbass.

One of the phantoms, both hands on its club, howled as if to drown out its fear and approached me. Red Alert, the Relic on my right pinkie, grew hot to signify the impending threat. Yeah, as if I could dodge it.

The club that would have smashed me paper-thin bounced off another barrier. This was bad. I was more hopeless than I'd thought. I couldn't get myself to move. Even though I knew a Safety Ring would protect me, I was

terrified.

The phantoms cowered at the human standing unaffected by the colossal blow. I, too, was cowering, but on the inside.

My loyal Hounding Chain rattled on my belt as it sensed my mortal peril. The chain was valuable enough to bring me to tears if it were to break. But desperate times called for desperate measures. Hopefully, the chain would hold off the wolves long enough.

I clicked it off of my belt. The freshly recharged chain sprang up and slithered towards the wolf knight with the club. It wasn't strong enough to take a wolf knight down, but it proved a serious nuisance to the hulking phantom. The chain wrapped itself around the wolf's legs and toppled it. The other three wolves cautiously kept their distance, apparently never having dealt with a chain like this.

Of course the thing scared them. It had scared me the first time I'd seen it in action, but the Hounding Chain couldn't hold them all off. That bow and that gun scared the crap out of me. Why was the world full of darkness and terror? I couldn't help but wonder if the wolves would chase me if I simply ran out of there.

The wolf knights were very wary of me... Well, they were wary of the slime around my neck, at least. Nevertheless, their eyes burned with anger that threatened to overtake them. All I wanted to do was run. I no longer cared about the hunters we were supposed to rescue. I wanted to go home.

Cursing my luck, I held out both palms and activated my Shooting Rings. Ring Relics themselves were relatively well-known, but not many people knew that there were two types: ones that only worked when put on a finger and ones that worked as long as the user carried them in some way. Shooting Rings were in the latter category.

Li'l Gilbert watched in awe as countless bullets of light floated above my hands. I had activated all the Shooting Rings stuffed in the pouch on my belt. Ring Relics were very light, and Shooting Rings were cheap by Relic standards, so anyone with a little money and time could pull off something like this.

The type of Shooting Ring determined the color of its bullet, so a kaleidoscope

of color was refracting in the palm of my hands. It was very eye-catching, if I do say so myself, but it was also very weak.

The wolf knights stirred, wary that I was about to launch another attack, but it was no use. They'd have no chance of dodging all of these bullets. While ordinary Shooting Rings only fired in a straight line, I had Never Miss a Shot 9000 with me.

The spheres floated up, and as per my input, assaulted the wolves from all directions. The wolves tried to dodge out of the way, but I manipulated the projectiles and chased the wolves down. I didn't even give them a chance to reach for their weapons.

Figuring that they couldn't outmaneuver the bullets, or thinking that the spell tracked them automatically, the wolves dove to the ground and curled up like turtles. Without mercy, I cast down the magical volley onto their backs.

"Wow," Li'l Gilbert said, clearly impressed by my parlor trick.

Rhuda seemed to share his sentiment. "So this is what a Level 8 can do..."

Tino watched with admiration in her eyes. I wasn't going to turn down any compliments. I wouldn't have turned down any monetary tips for my performance either, but I would settle for them finally running away like I'd told them to.

Magic rained down on the phantoms, striking their heads, arms, shoulders, eyes, and even the skulls they wore like half masks. The array of bullets burned, froze, sparked, and burst upon impact. Every one of the Shooting Rings I'd brought was unique, each of them producing a different kind of magic.

The phantoms let out low growls. Once all the magical bullets had exploded, darkness returned. My strategy, as flashy and impressive as it had looked, had one crippling downside: it sucked.

As the party watched with bated breath, the wolf knights rose from their protective positions. There wasn't a scratch on any of them.

"After all of that..." Rhuda lamented, nearly in tears.

The phantoms snarled as if curious.

Hey, I couldn't help it! Most Relics weren't designed to kill. Weapon Relics were another story; most of those relied on their wielder's skill to be effective. In the hands of someone like me, who had no talent as a fighter whatsoever, they were completely useless.

Once the phantoms had all risen to their feet and made sure they were unharmed, they shot me a collective glare for unleashing that joke of an attack.

I guess it didn't work after all.

Some of the rings did pack an effect that temporarily paralyzed their target or put them to sleep, but I guess those effects were negated. To the best of my knowledge, Shooting Rings had originally been designed to be used against humans, anyway. No wonder they hadn't done much against the wolf knights.

Now, I was out of all cards but one. It was time to buck up. The wolves would win if the battle was drawn out much longer.

"Oh well. I didn't really want to use this today, but..."

Screw it.

I took off the finger-sized capsule from around my neck. The wolf knights went wide-eyed and took a few steps back. I knew they were afraid of the capsule, not me. If I was going to die, I might as well take those damn wolves with me.

I was a dead man, anyway. At least this way, I'd take those damn wolves with me, in the cataclysm of Sitri's slime—which was supposedly some sort of wacky slime engineered by my friend Sitri. I didn't know much about the thing, and I didn't want to know.

Trembling from trepidation, I popped off the cap and carefully peeked into the capsule. Then I rubbed my eyes and checked again. Frowning, I shakily stuck my finger inside. Tino and the others were watching me with growing concern.

With nothing left to lose, I gave one big nod, replaced the cap, and then lobbed the capsule at the wolves, firing a magic bullet at it. The wolves quickly scattered, terrified of the incoming projectile.

As soon as I made sure the bullet I controlled was flying towards the capsule, I

darted in Tino's direction. "Hurry, Tino!"

Tino and her party snapped out of it and sprinted into the passage. The capsule exploded behind me. The wolves howled in agitation, but there was no time to look back. We had to make it out of there before the phantoms realized the capsule was completely empty.

Where did the contents go, anyway? I shuddered at the thought.

I channeled every drop of my strength into controlling my breathing and moving my legs. It had been a while since I'd last sprinted like that, and I couldn't afford to turn around.

We dashed through the dark and narrow tunnels, the cold air brushing my cheeks. The Great Greg, Li'l Gilbert, Rhuda, and Tino ran a few paces in front of me. Despite going as fast as I could, I wasn't catching up to them, which meant they were pacing themselves so I could keep up.

Li'l Gilbert turned around, sprinting with that greatsword of his as though it were nothing. Although he was frowning, he looked much more at ease than he had when I had arrived. Was he recuperating while we ran? What a freak.

"They'll catch up to us at this rate," he said. "We need to go faster—"

"You idiot! Krai's minding Tino's injury!" Rhuda scolded.

"Ah, I didn't realize," Gilbert said. "I'm sorry."

Wait, Tino's hurt? And I can still barely keep up with her? Come on, I wasn't that slow of a runner. Comparing me to Tino of all people was simply unfair. Maybe I had subconsciously been going slower for Tino's benefit. No one could prove otherwise.

Rhuda's comment stung a little, but it did bring me back to my senses. Making sure there was no scary howling coming from behind us, I stopped. While I didn't have the skill set of a Thief, I was sure Tino would have said something if we were still being chased. It looked like we'd lost them.

The others took my pause as their cue to stop with me. They must have bonded during their quest, because they were much more agreeable now.

“Are we good?” Li’l Gilbert asked.

“I guess we lost them. That was close.” The Great Greg turned to me. “You really saved our hides back there.”

I didn’t deserve his thanks, really. I deserved to beg for their forgiveness. For now, though, we had to get ourselves together. Holding in projectile vomit, I steadied my breathing and turned to Tino.

Tino clutched her own shoulders and shrunk back. “M-Master...”

“Krai, Tino really gave it her all,” said Rhuda, piping up. “Without her, we’d have all been dead by the time you came to save us.” She sounded apologetic for some reason.

“Right, right,” I said thoughtfully. “If only an apology could fix everything...”

No one had to tell me that Tino was pushed to her very limit. I could see it, as clear as day. Her usually immaculate hair was disheveled, and there was no color left in her face. Her black shorts were torn, revealing much of the fair skin on her right thigh, which drew my attention to... *Ahem*, the sight sure was alluring.

Tino noticed my glance and pulled the right leg of her shorts up as far as it could go. What was she doing? This hardly seemed like the right place to give me a peep of her panties. She was looking away as if embarrassed, her lips tightly sealed.

I kept staring at her until Li’l Gilbert broke the silence. “You can heal people, Thousand Tricks?”

Oh, so that’s where she’s hurt. Tino really needs to work on her communication. I just thought she was up to her usual tricks. The whole reason we’d stopped was so I could heal Tino up.

I examined the pale thigh she was proudly presenting to me. I didn’t see any wound or scar, but I wasn’t going to deny that she was badly hurt, seeing how she could barely run faster than me.

Naturally, I had brought my healing Relics with me. How could I have not? I took the silver cross—a Relic called Healing Faith—from about my neck and

held it up to Tino's thigh. A blue light emanated from the cross and faded into her leg. She relaxed ever so slightly.

Sorry I didn't realize sooner, Tino.

"Thanks, master. It doesn't hurt anymore," she said.

Well, Tino *would* have to carry my weight for years to come.

Having watched the healing process, Li'l Gilbert sighed in relief. "Oh, it's just a healing Relic."

Just a healing Relic? So what? Did this ingrate have a problem with me relying on Relics for absolutely everything? If we'd been anywhere but inside a treasure vault, I would have stormed off back to the clan house.

"Krai, did you take out those wolf knights?" the Great Greg asked, keeping an eye on the way we'd come.

If I had to give him an answer, it would be "Not a chance." Wolves had a keen sense of smell. Those wolf knights must have feared the smell left on the capsule. I had no idea if slimes had an odor to them, but I couldn't think of another explanation. By now, those dogs must be mad as hell. They'd been deceived by an empty capsule and let their prey escape from beneath their noses.

The only thing we had to focus on now was getting out of here. Even those dreadful phantoms shouldn't be able to follow us out of the vault. Besides, the rescue mission was toast. There's no way those hunters had survived all this time. We wouldn't be doing anyone any favors by getting ourselves killed trying to save them.

I let out a long sigh and stretched. Having lost my sword was a terrible shame, but one measly Relic certainly wasn't worth me risking my life for. Since it was doubtful that the Hounding Chain would return to me on its own, I'd simply have someone fetch it for me later.

"I didn't, but that was the best course of action for us back there," I said. "That's not what we need to focus on. Let's keep walking."

"Y-You got it," the Great Greg replied.

Two questions remained: where were we, and where was the exit?

We walked on in silence, with me in the lead. There was no chitchat this time, since everyone was so exhausted.

As per the map I'd seen beforehand, the White Wolf's Den was like an anthill, with tight passages crisscrossing throughout—in other words, everything looked the same. While the den wasn't too expansive of a vault, it was entirely possible we were retracing the same set of passages over and over.

Why am I leading the march, anyway? Isn't this Thief work? This party has two, for crying out loud!

I had tried stopping for a bit to let Tino or Rhuda take the lead, only for them to dutifully stop a pace behind me.

I thought Tino was more of a go-getter than this...

Each time I looked at her, she turned away like she was sick of me. Like she never wanted to speak to me again. Like she wanted me dead. I never thought I'd see the day when Tino despised me. Maybe I should have begged for forgiveness when I'd had the chance. We were still in a dangerous treasure vault, though. Checkmate, it felt like.

I had no choice but to blindly carry on. Here and there, I decided to turn on a whim. The only silver lining was that we didn't encounter any enemies along the way. Maybe this vault wasn't so densely populated, after all. Or, more likely, Tino was subtly guiding us away from any enemies. We heard the occasional howl echoing through the labyrinthian den, but those howls were always distant. At least, I thought they were distant. I hoped they were.

We had been walking for a while, but there was still no sign of the exit. I was pretty sure we were at least headed in the right general direction, but this was why I hated cave-type vaults.

Just as I was considering if the time was right for me to grovel on my hands and knees for Tino to forgive me, Li'l Gilbert spoke up. "Hey, I'm sorry if you're not telling us on purpose, or something, but where are we headed? The exit?"

He had grown wonderfully sheepish over the course of the day. Unfortunately, I had no clue. The exit was our target destination, at least.

As I was about to say as much, Tino hurriedly piped up. “Gilbert, interpreting our master’s intentions is part of the training. And we’re not headed to the exit. The passage we took out of the boss room has no outlet. We need to pass through the boss room again to leave here.”

“R-Really? We’re still training?” Gilbert said.

R-Really? I couldn’t help but internally mirror Li’l Gilbert’s response. I was totally heading for the exit. At least, I was trying to head that way, but apparently I took the wrong tunnel. Wait, that was the boss room? No wonder those phantoms looked loads stronger than expected. So, now what? Does this mean we have to go all the way back? And Tino was training in this situation? Where else would I possibly try to take us except the exit? This is why I’m so sick of people who are too hard on themselves.

“But, Krai,” Rhuda timidly asked, “can’t you at least tell us where we’re headed?”

I felt pathetic. Where was I headed? I was always lost—not just in this treasure vault, but in life in general. There were no landmarks whatsoever, so there was no telling what was what, even though the party was acting for some reason like I was their guide.

First chance I get, I’m gonna make a casual U-turn. Those wolf knights will be long gone by the time we make it back to the boss room. If only I could make a U-turn in my life... I held back my tears and put on a stern expression.

I made a turn. One more turn in the same direction would pretty much make a U-turn, but would it really be safe to return to the boss room?

We marched for several minutes. Just as I was thinking about making that second turn, the Great Greg gasped. I turned to find him looking at me like I was some sort of freak.

“It can’t be,” he muttered. “There was no trail. He wasn’t even looking. How —”

“I told you. Master always does things for a reason.”

“Save it, you two! We have to help them!” Rhuda cried, running on ahead.

Finally, I spotted several silhouettes collapsed up ahead, too small to belong to phantoms. After staring at them for a few moments, I noticed they were moving a little.

What, did the Great Greg spot them from all the way over here? These guys sure have great eyesight. I might have even turned down another passage without seeing them.

Are those the lost hunters we’re here for? I wondered. I really hadn’t expected them to be alive, lucky ducks. Maybe their good fortune would rub off on me.

Tino puffed her chest, gazing up at me admiringly. “See? I told you it’s all according to plan.”

“No, no. This is obviously a coincidence,” I said. I couldn’t see the future—not even with the help of all of my Relics combined.

Li’l Gilbert sighed. “Why would you say that, when you brought us here?”

We approached the hunters we’d been tasked to save. The one closest to us was a man larger than even the Great Greg. He wore a full set of dull gray armor and had a large green shield on his back. Within arm’s reach lay an enormous conical lance that would have never been used in human warfare. Its distinct glow indicated that it was a Relic.

The man was Rudolph Davout. Before receiving the request, I’d not heard the name before, but his well-built frame was becoming of his Level 5 rank. Tino and the Great Greg clearly knew him, solidifying the fact that they had taken on this quest despite knowing that a Level 5 hunter had become stranded. What weirdos.

Rudolph apparently had a broken bone, because Tino and the gang rushed over and took off his armor before making him drink a potion. I wouldn’t have even known what to untie to get the armor off of him.

The other members of the lost party were lying nearby, completely worn out. Some of them seemed badly hurt, but at least they were all alive. It was miraculous that they hadn’t been finished off lying this deep in a treasure vault.

“How’s the pain?” Tino asked.

Rudolph wheezed. His cheeks were sunken, but his eyes burned with a faint but unmistakable flicker of life. “I’m all right. Thanks. You saved us.”

“Master is the one you should thank.”

“I haven’t done anything,” I protested. There was no arguing that I’d been as useless as ever. The only thing I could have been credited for was sending in Tino and company...which, on second thought, deserved thanks, didn’t it?

With wavering eyes, Rudolph looked at me. He was completely out of stamina after being trapped for three days in this hole. For whatever it was worth, I handed him a chocolate bar I always carried around as a snack. Rudolph scarfed it down.

“Do you have food?” I asked when he was done.

“Outside...” Rudolph croaked.

“So is our food, master. We planned to camp outside of the vault.”

“Ah, gotcha. We always camped inside,” I remarked.

My friends had a funny habit of seeing dangerous treasure vaults as convenient training grounds.

Once we’d settled down, I reassessed the situation. Some of Rudolph’s party members were unconscious, but we poured a potion down their throats so they wouldn’t die on us just yet. Now that we knew all of them were alive, another problem dawned on us: their survival was good news to the Association, for sure, but it also meant a lot of work for us, the rescuers. Carrying five injured hunters would be a grueling task, especially through a vault with those scary phantoms. We wouldn’t exactly be breezing out of here.

The Level 5 Rudolph was surely a trusty ally under normal circumstances, but I couldn’t expect him to take on those phantoms after being stranded for three days with hardly any food or drink. Besides, they were in this situation because they couldn’t defeat those phantoms in the first place.

Could Rudolph even move in his full armor? I certainly couldn’t carry it, or even his lance. If I still had my sword Relic, it would be a different story.

Rudolph would probably have to leave his armor behind. Besides, the phantoms could spot us any minute. Time was of the essence. Rudolph might have been a lucky guy, but I was tremendously unlucky.

Peering into Rudolph's eyes as he seemed to hang on the brink of unconsciousness, Tino asked, "What happened? You're Level 5. You should have been able to hold your own here."

She was right. Level 5 hunters were top tier. Rudolph didn't look like he had accumulated unearned levels like I had, and he hadn't even taken on the vault alone.

Rudolph bit his lip, his widened eyes alone conveying the terror he'd faced. "There's something bad down here, something far, far worse than Level 3. We didn't underestimate it, but we couldn't... Nothing worked. My lance, his maneuvers..."

"Yeah, we know," Li'l Gilbert interrupted. He didn't know how to read a room yet. "Some wolf knight with half of its muzzle covered with a human skull."

Rudolph grew even more astonished and began shaking his head. He was pale in the face, his stricken eyes wide as if the fearsome enemy still loomed before him. "Half? No. The one that got us had its whole face covered with a skull. We need to get out—"

Tino's expression hardened as she looked at me. *What? This isn't my fault.* Still, knowing that there was a phantom even stronger than the ones we'd faced made me want to write an angry letter. What was going on in this treasure vault?

Sure, I was unlucky, but there had to be a limit, right? There was no way we'd be so unfortunate as to run into this phantom. I wanted to laugh it off, but for some reason, I just wasn't in the mood.

Master, you're the light in the darkness!

Tino was overcome with emotion as she watched her adoring master take out chocolate bar after chocolate bar from his small leather pack and hand them to their companions. She was sure that out of all the hunters in the capital, no

other surpassed Krai Andrey. His bravery and kindness were the very qualities that Tino admired about him.

“Why’ve you even got all this?” Gilbert asked him rudely.

“That’s classified,” Krai replied.

Rhuda watched him, exasperated. “Don’t you have anything but chocolate in there?”

“Nope. There’s plenty to go around, though.” He seemed completely unbothered by either comment, continuing to break the tension with every bar he handed out.

Tino’s mentor, Lizzy, was a (freakishly) powerful hunter, but there was more to her dear master than strength alone. He was kind for saving Tino at the last minute when she couldn’t handle his trial, and his levelheadedness allowed him to prioritize saving the lost hunters—the objective of the quest Tino had neglected—by shaving precious minutes in walking away from the phantoms he could have easily finished off. Using tracking skills to rival even those of a Thief, he had discovered the lost hunters himself and wasted no time until he’d found them. The fact that they hadn’t encountered any phantoms en route suggested that he had sensed their presence—or perhaps the wolf knights feared him as much as the boss phantoms had. Most impressively, Krai was willing to sacrifice his pride and play the part of the jester.

While many people considered Ark the most powerful hunter of his generation, he couldn’t pull off half of the things her master made look so easy. In Tino’s eyes, Krai was the epitome of the perfect hunter, someone who was more worthy of the Level 10 title than anyone.

Of course, there was his troublesome habit of dishing out ruthless trials, but even those were a form of tough love, only given because he expected the same of his prodigies as he did of himself. Case in point, he had swooped in for the rescue when Tino was truly at her wit’s end. She wouldn’t go so far as to call this a flaw in her master.

“What now?” Greg asked.

“We’ll get out of here as soon as we can. We did what we came for.”

For hunters, fighting and defeating fearsome foes was considered an accolade, but Krai didn't so much as hesitate in his answer. He must have been concerned for the stamina of the rescued hunters. As nourishing as those chocolate bars were, the six hunters were far from full strength. Of course, it was also possible that Tino's master considered even those wolf knights beneath him and not worth the effort of defeating.

Just watching her master gave Tino strength to keep her exhausted body moving. She couldn't stand to let her hero watch her fail anymore. She had already failed her trial. Even though she'd been overcome with joy when he'd come to her aid, she still wanted to earn his respect, even if she couldn't hold a candle to her master's prowess.

Just then, Krai glanced over at Tino. That was all it took to send her heart drumming away. There was a gentle smile on his face. "Well, Tino's the leader on this quest. I'll follow her lead."

"What?! But I'm nothing compared to you," she said weakly.

There were few hunters who could match the brilliant Thousand Tricks who had, from all the way in the capital, detected trouble. Tino shrank back as her master continued.

"It's all about the experience," he said with all seriousness. "I'll give you a hand when you really need it."

Now that he'd said that, she couldn't very well defer her decision-making to him. Tino thought about her decision and spoke, glancing at her master for some form of approval. "Like master said, we should prioritize leaving the vault as quickly as possible."

"You're going to lead the way, right?" her master asked.

She nodded without a second thought.

As any half-decent hunter would have, Tino had memorized the map of the treasure vault before embarking on this quest. In fact, she knew where they were now. There was no getting lost. She wouldn't allow herself to rely on Krai's directions.

"Of course," she said. "Although I may not be able to avoid all of the

phantoms like you did.”

“What? Oh, yeah, right. Try your best to avoid them, though. That’s pretty important.”

“Absolutely, master. My pain’s gone, so I won’t hold us back anymore.”

“Yeah, uh, right. We were going a bit slow earlier, but these people have been stranded here for days. Don’t forget that.”

Tino’s cheeks glowed from her embarrassment. She had forgotten about the lost hunters, as she’d been too preoccupied with her master’s gaze. She wouldn’t let this happen again.

Of course, the hunters they were rescuing were pretty capable themselves, so they wouldn’t have to slow down as much as they had on their way there, but she didn’t see the point in mentioning that now. Her master was making a point.

Tino quelled the overwhelming shame she felt. This wasn’t the time for it. She also knew full well that Krai could pick a hundred things about her that weren’t up to his standards yet. She could only show him her best performance as a hunter and leader.

Bearing her master’s expectant gaze, Tino said, “And, just in case, while this may be unnecessary with master here, it may be best to ask Rudolph about the humanoid wolf knight that attacked him.”

The silver wolf knight slowly raised its head as a small silhouette entered without a sound. Under the wolf’s foot lay a mangled piece of metal that reeked of a smell it didn’t recognize. Still, from the moment the wolf had caught a whiff, instinct had told it to be wary of the thing.

Now, however, the bipedal wolf knight—that was at least as smart as the ancient Silver Moons—knew that the thing was harmless and that it had been hoodwinked. It also knew with confidence that it could tear through every single one of its human foes.

The bizarre chain that had stopped the wolves in their tracks was now on the

ground, powerless. Even if a similar weapon were to be unleashed against them, the wolf knight knew how to deal with it.

The wolf knight lifted the greatsword as long as itself and turned around almost lazily. Behind the half-skull mask it wore, its crimson eye scorched with even greater hatred than before.

The other two wolves that had remained in the room lifted their faces. Their eyes fell on a figure much shorter than they were—a figure masked by a beaming skull. The figure was not clad in heavy armor as the wolf knights, but rather a lighter outfit that emphasized lighter movement. It was almost humanlike in garb, save for the brilliant knee-high boots that shone with silver light. While the figure didn't even reach a third of the height of the towering wolf knight, the newcomer seemed cloaked in an aura of death dreadfully thicker than that of the wolf knights.

In its hand, the shorter creature held a midsize sword with an almost translucent blade unlike the blades of the wolf knights. It was Silent Air, the sword Relic. The sword had a distinct glow about it as it unceremoniously dangled in the figure's hand. The phantoms had no clue that this sword had fallen in this very vault from the back of a Level 8 hunter.

The White Wolf's Den was the result of a curse left behind by the Silver Moons on the brink of their extinction. Their visceral feelings towards humanity had a strong influence on the mana material in the vault—hatred and admiration that were two sides of the same coin. The wolves had envied humans for their power, appearance, and intelligence.

These emotions had manifested in the silver wolf knights in their bipedalism, weapons, and the skulls covering half of their faces. But if they were the manifestation of the Silver Moons' mixed emotions, who, then, was this figure fully masked by bone?

The White Wolf's Den had once lacked the mana material to bring the curse of the Silver Moons to fruition. Now, it had become a perilous cave treacherous enough to defeat and trap Level 5 hunters.

The shadowy figure wearing the laughing skull stepped forward before the trio of towering wolf knights. The beasts howled, charged with their ancient

hatred for humanity.

Chapter Five: The Grieving Soul

Rudolph Davout had once possessed absolute confidence in his abilities. After joining the imperial knights, he had trained with blood, sweat, and tears to master the lance. His prowess had only improved after he'd switched careers to treasure hunting and soaked up an abundance of mana material. Compared to his new skills as a hunter, his former skills as the top lancer of the order paled in comparison.

When powered by Rudolph, who could break a steel beam in half with his bare hands, the lance Relic he wielded, Soaring Dragoon, could pierce thick metal shields. Anyone who managed to block the blow was torn apart from the wind gust generated by the Relic's ability.

Even still, as a former knight, Rudolph's true forte was defense. His armor, while not a Relic, could survive unscathed against attacks from most phantoms. That combined with the shield in his left hand, Rudolph was an iron wall. He was confident he could even match the Grievors' legendary Immutable.

At Level 5, Rudolph was a relatively inexperienced hunter, but he was on track to earning himself a moniker. While his party members weren't quite on par with him, they were all talented hunters.

It was Rudolph's warranted self-confidence that had led him to accept this quest. Since the White Wolf's Den was two levels lower than their regular roster of treasure vaults, he had felt no concern about their task. The party had thoroughly prepared too, even though the vault was a much lower level than what they were used to.

At first, the journey had been smooth sailing, with Rudolph and his party tearing through phantom after phantom. Then, three days in, they noticed a change. The phantoms that materialized in their path suddenly grew stronger. The change was barely noticeable at first, but they had soon become far more threatening than anything expected from the White Wolf's Den.

If anything, Rudolph's party was *too* strong. Even with one man down, they

completely outclassed even the new and improved phantoms of the den. Their initial wariness quickly subsided. As strange as it was for the phantoms to rapidly grow in strength, the party wasn't concerned as long as they could still handle the beasts.

The skull-masked wolf knights with silver fur had raised their brows, but even those wolves hadn't put up much of a challenge against Rudolph's muscles, Relics, and comrades.

At this point, there was no denying the abnormality of their predicament. Still, the party had had plenty of strength left in them, with only a day left on their original itinerary of exploration. Rudolph had weighed his options but soon decided to press on.

On what was supposed to have been their final day in the vault, Rudolph had encountered something even more peculiar—a shorter wolf knight wearing the full skull mask: the incarnation of the Silver Moons' grudge against humanity.

Once everyone was conscious and somewhat rested, we began our doomed journey home. Even in war, retreat was the time when the most casualties occurred. With half of us injured and the treasure vault clearly out of whack, our fate was out of our hands.

The Great Greg was lifting two of the larger hunters, Li'l Gilbert one of the men, and Rhuda the lightest girl of Rudolph's party. The hunters we were rescuing could probably have walked on their own if pushed to it, but it was better to save their strength for when they really needed it.

Since Rudolph had the best chance of being useful in a fight, I spent every drop of mana in Healing Faith to get him walking on his own. He was far from shipshape but managed one heavy step after another in his hefty armor, using his lance as a cane.

We walked on under Tino's watchful eye. Since I had no strength or endurance, I was a complete liability, even though I did have the highest level out of us all.

Although he looked like he was on the brink of collapsing again, Rudolph

spoke clearly. “If that boss shows up, I’ll hold it off. I’ll buy as much time as I can.”

“We’re not leaving you behind,” Tino replied, sounding more and more like a full-fledged hunter.

Rudolph grunted remorsefully, not acknowledging the response. “Take care of them. Get them to Zebrudia. Please...”

If given the choice between talent and luck, any hunter would pick the latter. So often did a high-level hunter blessed with talent disappear overnight. It was anyone’s guess what Rudolph and his party had been doing in the den in the first place, but they seemed like they’d played it safe enough. Sheer bad luck had gotten them into this mess.

The odds were stacked against us. Even if we were to encounter one of those giant silver wolves—not to mention the one with the full skull mask—there’d be a slim chance of all of us making it out alive.

Rudolph must have been more aware of that fact than anyone else was. Exhausted rescuees were always the first to be left behind. Most hunters didn’t get to Level 5 without having to watch a few friends die.

“Don’t worry,” Tino simply said. “Master won’t let anything happen to us.”

The amount of trust she put in me was beyond healthy. The only thing I could do was bolt. The Night Hiker was a one-man ride, but I could probably manage to fly carrying someone. Luckily, Tino was small enough for me to carry. Worst-case scenario, I was ready to ditch the rescuees and the rest of Tino’s party and fly out of there.

Of course, I’d try to get everyone out alive. I’d try my very best, but I also had my priorities straight.

Rudolph turned to me and bowed low. Praying to me wouldn’t do a thing, though. I was no god.

He continued to talk as we traversed the tight passages, as if he was trying to distract from the terror that lurked around the corner. “We only survived because it was toying with us.”

“Toying with you how?” Li’l Gilbert asked.

“It had a sword, and it was ridiculously good with it. It parried my best shot. Every one of its blows tore through my shield, armor, flesh, and bone. There’s no doubt about it; if it wanted us dead, we would have been in seconds. It injured us all and let us loose, most likely to weaken us and torture us to death. Or it just wanted to let us starve. That thing was smarter, stronger, and crueler than any phantom I’ve seen.”

Even Li’l Gilbert listened with a somber expression.

Phantoms became stronger and more intelligent the more mana they took in. In lower-level vaults, phantoms were barely indistinguishable from feral beasts, but in upper-levels, it wasn’t unusual for them to understand our language. Those, however, were not likely to show up in a vault like this.

“I’ve been to a Level 6 vault just once,” Rudolph continued. “Heck, I turned tail and ran from that place without even finishing the quest. The phantom we saw back there was way beyond anything I saw that time, no doubt about it.”

That was ridiculous. There’s no way a Level 3 vault would become so much more difficult from a little shift in the environment. It was possible for powerful phantoms to appear through a mutation, but I’d never heard of one so much scarier than they were supposed to be.

“I know it’s hard to believe,” Rudolph said, “but I saw it with my own eyes. We stood no chance. Its swordsmanship was so fierce, it could even...” Rudolph’s face contorted in fear and his body trembled slightly. “It could even match up to the Protean Sword.”

“The Protean Sword?!” the Great Greg parroted, wide-eyed. There was no Swordsman alive who hadn’t heard of him.

Li’l Gilbert was listening intently. Meanwhile, Tino kept glancing my way. She didn’t have to be so concerned.

The Protean Sword was the moniker of the Swordsman rumored to be the best in the capital. He had studied traditional swordsmanship under the Sword Saint and used that foundation to learn pretty much every sword technique there was. This masterful Swordsman (aka “sword nut”) was no other than Luke

Sykol—a member of Grieving Souls. Hilarious.

I must have been the only one there who wasn't shaken by the name-drop. Unlike mine, Luke's title wasn't just an embellishment. When it came to sword fighting, he really was the best of the best. Even Ark would be no match for Luke. I refused to believe that this phantom was anywhere near his level.

If, however, such a phantom did exist, Luke would have taken it out already.

Nonetheless, Rudolph looked deadly earnest. His fear might have been playing a part, but he had at least convinced me that the thing was outlandishly strong. We'd do best to avoid encountering it. No doubt Tino couldn't take it out.

Dammit, I thought. I knew I should have waited for Ark.

The wolves' howls echoed over and over from beyond the passage, nearly giving me a heart attack each time. Worse, their reverberation off the walls of the den made it impossible to calculate a distance between us and them—not that I could have pulled off such a thing. If only Red Alert could pick up on scary wolves around the corner, but the Relic was pretty hit and miss.

"It was short," Rudolph carried on. "Less than half the size of the half-masked wolf knights and immeasurably stronger than them."

The Great Greg let out a long sigh. "Well, ain't this our unlucky day?"

I couldn't have said it better myself. I'd love to have a drink with the man—if we made it out of this, of course.

Rudolph had taken out several phantoms on his way inside, but the party hadn't let the unexpected phantoms shake them. Apparently, they'd dealt with a few of the half-masked phantoms and had just been getting ready to leave when the shorter one had attacked. With how little traffic there was here, they would have been found dead if we hadn't come along.

The man Li'l Gilbert was helping muttered as if in delirium. "Rudolph came all this way for me—"

"Can it, Helian," Rudolph snarled.

From the sounds of it, Rudolph's party had their own baggage. Whatever that

baggage was, it sounded depressing. I couldn't handle any more downers right now, so I shrugged. "You can talk it over all you want—once we're back in the capital."

"R-Right," Rudolph replied.

"Incredible, master. You're all-knowing. All-powerful."

If I were all-powerful, I would have struck down this treasure vault with thunder and lightning and burned it to the ground.

We carried on at a sluggish pace, as fast as the rescuees could go. Maybe we were halfway back to the entrance. At around that point, the Great Greg cinched his brow and expressed what we were all thinking.

"This isn't good, is it?"

"What's going on?" Li'l Gilbert asked nervously.

The howls had grown much more frequent. When we had started our journey to the exit, we'd stopped every time we'd heard a howl. Now, we were spending more time walking in the echo of howls than in silence. Something was going on—we just didn't know what.

My seventeen Safety Rings had been whittled down to five. That meant I'd be dead on attack number six, and I barely had any usable Relics on me. The Hounding Chain hadn't returned. My Shooting Rings could still fire, but the wolves had seen that trick already. Firing the rings again wouldn't so much as slow the phantoms down.

I did have one item packed with some charge, but my sister had loaded it with a spell that would flatten the entire area. Naturally, that was my last resort. I only had one shot of it, and AOE spells lacked in power compared to those that focused on a single target. I was dubious whether it would have any effect on an estimated Level 8 phantom.

Am I screwed? I feel like I am screwed. Did I not bring the right Relics for the job?

Everything was unexpected. I hadn't expected this vault to have phantoms that Tino couldn't handle, nor for Rudolph's party to have survived. It was a nice

surprise that Tino's partymates had fought better than I had expected, but every other surprise of the day sucked. On top of it all, I'd gone and lost a Relic. Maybe karma was at work.

Just then, Tino stopped in front of me. "M-Master, something big's coming." She looked strikingly frail, filled with nervousness that hadn't been there before, which in turn filled me with a strong protective instinct.

Li'l Gilbert snapped to attention, lowering the rescuee from his shoulder and placing him down by the wall.

Rudolph lifted his lance, cold sweat trickling down his rocky face.

Everyone was ready to fight. I could feel the tension in the air tightening around my shoulders. I had no choice. I pulled Tino behind me and stood before her. Don't let anyone say I don't have a little bit of pride.

"M-Master?!"

"Stay back. It's dangerous," I said.

Oh, well. I'd show them the best human missile that had ever flown. The Night Hiker was almost out of mana, but I was sure there was enough for me to propel myself forward. Not even those silver fiends would expect a human to come flying at them at breakneck speed, so I had one shot...I think. I'd careered into one's armor the first time around, but with a miracle, I could knock one's head off. Of course, that attack would expend one of my lives, but that couldn't be helped.

I was so scared, my heartbeat started to slow. Apparently that was a thing that happened. It did occur to me that, if this phantom was anywhere as strong as Luke, I'd be slaughtered before I could shout bon voyage.

I squinted into the dim passage and at the curve up ahead. Then it emerged.

Rudolph gasped. He was a few paces behind me, speechless and colorless with dread.

Before us stood a humanoid phantom, its whole face obscured by a human skull. It was only half as tall as a wolf knight, about my height, but it exuded an aura so intimidating that taking on those wolf knights seemed like child's play in

comparison to taking on this. The phantom was also much more humanlike in appearance, especially in the shape of its head and its hair, although, viewed from the side, it appeared to have canine ears.

The figure backed away slowly, a pitch-black sword in its hand.

“What is that thing?” Li’l Gilbert squeaked, trembling.

It was strong. Very strong indeed. Red Alert was starting to heat up. If even I could tell how powerful this phantom was, Li’l Gilbert must have felt it in his bones. There was no doubt as to how lethal of a threat this figure was.

Then the nail in our coffin arrived: another human-sized silhouette. This one looked more jovial, wearing a smiling skull. It had forgone the armor but wore a pair of metallic knee-high boots.

As it casually approached the first phantom, I spotted a pair of familiar Relics in its grip: the Hounding Chain and Silent Air. I couldn’t help but blink and stare as I stared at them.

“Two of them?!” The Great Greg shuddered.

“No... What are we going to do, Krai?” Rhuda asked, all hope drained from her tone.

Even Rudolph, the strongest among us, froze up in the face of these foes.

Tino, however, showed the most visceral reaction. She cried out, almost on the verge of tears, and clung in pure terror to my arm.

“M-Master, no. Please help me. I don’t want to die. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’ll try my best. I’ll do anything. Please, anything but that. Help me, master,” she pleaded.

Tino’s freak-out, which was in stark contrast to her usual composure, left the rest of her temp party and Rudolph stunned.

With unnerving slowness, the smiling skull turned to me. Its eyes, unlike the wolf knight’s, were as dark as the abyss; the warped curve of its teeth shaping a grotesque smile that lamented the state of the world. I didn’t know what was going on anymore. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

I ruffled Tino’s hair to calm her, but left everyone else on the brink of despair.

Then I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Hey, it’s Liz.”

What’s she doing all the way down here?

The vast abundance of mana material brought into being an existence becoming of the White Wolf’s Den. Its mind awakened; synapses fired in its brain, and it gained consciousness. The first emotion this being experienced was not hatred, but exhilaration.

All five of its senses kicked into gear, delivering an overload of information to its brain. It could see far into the darkness and identify sounds among the distant echoes of the cavern. Strength coursed through its frame, and it knew already how to masterfully wield the sword on its belt.

The being, metaphorically speaking, could be described as the king of the Silver Moons: a product of the species’ boundless hatred and idolization of mankind. The king closely resembled a human but was unmistakably distinct from man. However, it still wore a human skull on its muzzle—a manifestation of its identity as a wolf.

The abundance of mana material that had accumulated in the den reconstructed the Red Moon into a higher being. Numerous silver wolf knights came into existence, intelligent and weapon-wielding. Those were the henchmen: loyal and powerful knights that served their king.

More than a decade after every trace of the Silver Moons save for their curse of a grudge had gone extinct, the den had returned to its rightful state. If Silver Moons had been as powerful as these phantoms were, they would have never been hunted down.

These wolves were strong. The five hunters that had recently invaded the den were more threatening than those who had come to hunt down the Silver Moons for profit, but they had been no match for the phantoms. Even the strongest of the human quintet, the one with the lance, had proved no threat against the silver wolf pack. Each strike with his lance would have been powerful enough to pierce through their armor, yet it hadn’t even connected.

The king of the wolves outclassed hunters—outclassed all of humanity—in strength, agility, and even intelligence. But unlike the other wolves, the king held no animosity towards humans. It felt only exhilaration. It relished every moment of amusement the humans provided as they fought tooth and nail against their insurmountable foe, and basked in the joy of all hope draining from their expressions. The king was enjoying the hunt so much that it had let the hunters “escape” into a passage with no way out.

The White Wolf’s Den was a hunting ground. There was only one way out of the cave for the pitiful prey that wandered in: death. Nothing escaped the king’s blade. The suffering of the foolish intruders—killing them, cornering them, dangling hope of escape before them just to take it away—would soothe the aching void within the wolves. Eventually, they would expand their den, but only once their numbers grew.

The king had purposefully stepped away from the boss chamber, where the hunters were sure to return, and was waiting for the right moment to strike when it heard the agonized howls of its kin.

Then it came face-to-face with one Grieving Soul wearing a beaming smile.

It was like a gale, a shadow, a lightning strike, a burst of flame—or else, a raging storm.

“Huh?” Li’l Gilbert muttered stupidly.

I hadn’t blinked or anything, but it looked like the boss phantom had been blasted away. By the time it bounced across the ground and came to a halt, the smiling skull was looming right before my eyes.

“What the...?!” Beside me, Rudolph’s eyes were bulging wide. The hilt of his lance clattered against the ground. He had this blank stare that said he couldn’t figure out what was going on.

No one could follow what had happened. Before the seasoned hunters by my side could lift a finger between them, the laughing skull zoomed closer to me, bright pink hair flowing behind the mask.

A cutesy soprano voice escaped from behind it, slightly muffled. “I just wanna

make sure of something, Krai Baby.”

Tino, still strangling my arm, tried to hide herself behind me. The laughing skull paid her no mind but used her thumb to indicate the boss at the other end of the tunnel.

“That’s not a new recruit of ours, is it?”

Liz’s voice was relaxed as ever, and I couldn’t help but feel relieved that she was acting the same as she always did.

The wolf king rose to one knee and then to its feet, glowering at the back of the smiling skull-wearer. I certainly didn’t recall knowing a violent wolf-man like that, although I knew plenty of humans far scarier than the thing.

Every hunter except me was more terrified of the laughing skull-wearer. Worst of all was Tino.

I forced myself to smile. “No. Let’s nix the mask, shall we?”

“That’s what I thought. Phew. I didn’t think it was the case, but it was wearing that mask and all. Oh, I found these. These are yours, aren’t they?” Liz asked with an almost sickeningly sweet tone. With that, she presented Silent Air and the Hounding Chain.

She was pissed. No doubt about it.

Liz theatrically reached for the mask and took it off. No one else moved a muscle. Even the boss wolf stood silently behind her. Long pink hair flowed freely in the air. Her blushed skin, small lips, symmetrical nose, and most of all her brilliant, peach-colored eyes composed an adorable profile, but I could feel the heat of an impending explosion simmering below the facade.

Rhuda gulped. “A human? What’s going on?”

“It can’t be!” The Great Greg took a step back, daunted by the revelation. Since he recognized Liz, maybe the Great Greg was a fan of hers.

At this point, Liz seemed to notice the rest of the hunters for the first time. “What? Don’t tell me you don’t know who we are?” Her eyes gleamed dangerously, and her obviously fake smile did nothing to hide it. “You pip-squeaks call yourselves hunters? Really? You still can’t tell, even though Krai’s

here? I don't believe this. What a bunch of posers. I didn't think there was anyone left in the capital who didn't know Grieving Souls."

Liz let the smiling skull mask, the symbol of the Grieving Souls, fall to the ground and laughed in disdain.

It was like a gale, a shadow, a lightning strike, a burst of flame—or else, a raging storm. Each and every element represented Liz Smart.

Her petite frame was bursting with energy like the sun itself. The question was, why was she here? This was definitely her, as far as I could tell from her face and demeanor. My mind was full of questions, and the others were just speechless.

"I'm sorry, Krai Baby," Liz whispered without a hint of sincerity. Her lips were quivering as if she was trying to hold in a torrent of emotion. She almost looked as if she were going to cry, but I knew better than to expect that. "Your dear Lizzy here is really sad. I ran all the way back after clearing the Night Palace, but you weren't there. Then I heard you went to a treasure vault..." Her words failed her. She was beginning to redden, her eyes kindled with a scorching flame. The air about her distorted with heat.

The heat rising from Liz began to permeate the cold air of the cave. Taking on that treasure vault must have riled her up. It was pretty common for high densities of mana material to make hunters have drastic mood swings. Even so, I couldn't help but think how the Night Palace was not anywhere near running distance from where we were.

"I'm sad. So sad. And very, very embarrassed!" she snarled. Her brows twisted; her eyes narrowed; and she gritted her teeth. "I trusted you. 'It must be some kind of mistake,' I said. I thought my little Krai Baby was just being overprotective again. I never would have expected an apprentice of *mine* to drop the ball taking out the trash!"

All the hunters were shaken by the look on Liz's face. Tino looked on the verge of death. I could feel her teeth chattering through her tight grip on my back. Talk about blowing it out of proportion. It's not like Liz was going to kill her.

“Wh-What the hell’s—” Li’l Gilbert tried to say, but just as the words left his lips, the kid was smashed against a wall.

“Huh? Get bent! Can’t you see I’m apologizing right now?!”



A moment later, we heard the sound of armor being pierced. The cave shook. Apparently, Liz had outsped the natural laws of physics.

Li'l Gilbert was twitching, his eyes rolled back and his armor caved in. His sacrifice would not be forgotten. The Great Greg rushed over, helped him up, and poured a bottle of potion on the kid. I admired the guy's guts, but he should have thought that through. Liz had a shorter fuse than anyone I knew.

Without so much as another glance at Li'l Gilbert, Liz addressed Tino, who was still standing shaking behind me. "Hey, T, what do you think your dear old mentor should do? Am I a bad teacher? Wasn't I training you hard enough? Or have you not got the talent? Maybe you don't have enough want for power. Hey, answer me, dipshit! You piece of garbage! I taught you better than that! You're gonna make my Krai Baby hate me! You fucking embarrassment! Kill yourself! You don't want to work hard? Drop dead, already! Kill yourself before you get in his way! Bite through your tongue, right now!"

"I'm sorry, Lizzy. I'm sorry. It's all my fault. I'm sorry I embarrassed you. It's all my fault because I'm weak. Please forgive me," Tino recited like a broken music box.

"Don't you dare apologize to me!" Liz snapped. "Who should you apologize to?! Think!"

Everyone in that tunnel was aghast, including the boss phantom. Tino worked hard, like, really hard, and Liz hadn't done everything wrong either. This was all on me for picking out such a stupid quest, but if I were to try and take the blame, Liz would have blamed Tino. That's the kind of person she was.

As Liz glared at Tino as if she were ready to smite her, I placed my hands on Liz's shoulders. "Liz, Tino worked really hard. She took out a phantom and found these people to rescue, which was the objective of the quest. Yep. She killed it, really."

Everyone there who knew the real story must have been looking at me like I had two heads, but Liz had no idea what had gone down in the den.

Liz's voice returned to a sane level and tone. "What? She did good? Really?"

"Yep. I heard they took out one of the big white ones by working together.

Really great stuff.”

“Just one?” Liz cocked her neck to the side. “Is it even worth keeping her alive?”

Whatever it was that was bugging her, it made me feel like I was trying to tame an apex predator. “Totally. I want to keep her alive, for one. And good job learning to go easy, Liz. I’m proud of you, really.”

“Oh, you could tell? Awesome, right? I practiced making semi-contact just for you, Krai Baby. I know it’s really important to you.” All that anger had vanished from Liz as she cheerily patted herself on the back.

No doubt Li’l Gilbert would disagree with the whole going easy thing, though. That hit had looked pretty full-contact from where I was standing.

Well, the fact that Gilbert was still alive was a huge step in the right direction. The old Liz would have definitely killed him. I must be some kind of genius to have taught that walking genocide some self-control, not that I’d done anything in particular to teach her that.

“I’m sorry I made you come down here, master,” Tino said quietly. Perfect timing. She knew exactly what she was doing after all those years of apprenticing for Liz.

“T is talented, you know?” Liz continued. “Just not enough determination, grit, and willingness to die. She’s a hundred times weaker than me, so she’s gotta work a hundred times harder.”

“Yep, totally,” I said, even though I had no idea what she was going on about. Still, I sensed a certain connection between Liz and Tino that vaguely resembled that of a trusting mentor and apprentice.

Although Liz was still stomping the ground in frustration, the majority of her wrath seemed to have passed. She could often be moody and explode without warning, but her tantrums never lasted for long.

The boss phantom hadn’t so much as taken a step during the entirety of our bickering. It only held its sword at the ready, watching Liz’s every move. Although it had been hit by her before, it showed no sign of having taken any harm. Unlike Li’l Gilbert’s armor, the boss phantom’s armor was spotless.

I heard footsteps. Another phantom turned the same corner that Liz had. I recognized its hulking frame as it squeezed through the narrow passage. It was one of the silver wolf knights we had encountered in the boss room—the one holding the huge firearm clearly designed for rapid fire.

Most firearms used by phantoms could find their origin in a specific period in ancient history when advanced technology had thrived. These weapons could not be recreated with modern technology and were also strong enough to obliterate even the most steadfast of hunters. They weren't easy foes to deal with.

The boss looked up at the much larger phantom and jerked its chin to us. The wolf knight didn't respond but turned to us.

Then it dawned on me—it wasn't that the boss had been cowering or waiting for an opening to attack. It had just been waiting for backup. Liz was its only threat, anyway. The rest of the group was comprised of six measly hunters, each with one foot in the coffin, a few newbie hunters at full strength, and me and my useless Level 8 title. My level was a good bluff against most hunters, but useless against monsters and phantoms.

Without even turning around, Liz looked at me. "There's more? Then I'll let you have one of them, T," she said with minimal interest.

"What? Lizzy..."

"Don't let me down."

We were standing ten meters away from the wolf knight, which was way too far away to deal with that firearm—not to mention the boss standing in the way. If Tino took even one step forward, she would be riddled with bullet holes. In such a tight passage, the wolf didn't even have to aim. Not even Tino could dodge those bullets. No reasonable hunter could be expected to pull that off.

The creak of metal armor interrupted the conversation. "I'll block it. I'll get you an opening, somehow." Rudolph stepped up to Liz's side, shield in hand. Although his green shield had been stripped of some paint and scratched here and there, it was as thick as a thin wall. It wasn't large enough to cover an entire body, but it would protect them from the majority of the bullets. That was promising. What a nice guy.

But Liz cast him a sideways glance and sighed. “Whatever. I’m done. Way to ruin the mood.”

“What?” Rudolph asked.

“I wanted T to do it, but I’m tired,” she said. “I need to cool down. I just can’t stand Tino making us look bad... Oh, that’s it.” Liz’s slender fingers retrieved her mask. She slipped it over her face as if to cover her quivering.

As she did, gunshots rattled the cave as countless bullets tore from the giant gun, accompanied by bursts of light. Someone screamed, but soon the gunshots subsided, and the passage was dark again.

The wolf had fired at Liz and everyone around us, but no one had fallen. Liz opened her outstretched left hand, letting the same bullets rain to the ground.

The wolf knight raised its firearm once more, pissing Liz off again.

“You think you can hit me with a normal-ass gun?!” she roared. “You little bitch! I’m way beyond the point of dealing with weapons of a physical civilization! I’ve transcended them! I’m beyond your level! Don’t you dare mock me!”

Another storm hailed over us, shaking the passage. Liz didn’t seem to move an inch, but the bullets fell powerlessly to the ground.

Liz continued yelling without breaking a sweat. “I don’t need a shield! T, you were trying to beat this slow-as-hell, weak-ass thing?! Did you learn nothing from your dear mentor?! Are you gonna embarrass me again?! You useless piece of shit! You better show me you can do this!”

Be reasonable, Liz, I thought, when I noticed Rhuda looking on, pale-faced. Maybe she could actually follow what Liz was doing. Rudolph just stood there, speechless.

I, on the other hand, watched with a gentle smile on my face as Liz went nuts. I couldn’t really follow her, but I knew what she was doing. That was one of the things that had finally made me forever stomp out my dream of becoming a hunter.

It was simple, really. Liz was just grabbing the bullets and tossing them away

with her bare hands. That's it. Sure, I understood the theory, but "fast" didn't even begin to describe what Liz was.

The first time Liz had shown me the trick, it had been as though she were showing off a new toy. I still have nightmares about her smile that day. And that lot expected me to go into treasure vaults with them that required pulling off those kinds of superhuman stunts.

The shooting stopped. The wolf had run out of bullets. I was curious how the wolf knight would fight with no bullets left, but I would never get a chance to find out.

Liz Smart had plenty of weaknesses. She couldn't cast magic, and she killed first and asked questions later. She was ridiculously harsh on her apprentice and couldn't handle sweet food. She couldn't read a room to save her life. However, there was one thing she had going for her—Liz was faster than anyone else in the world. She moved so fast, even her own shadow would be left behind, hence the name she was commonly known by: the Stifled Shadow.

Liz brushed off her hands and turned back to the wolves. I couldn't see through her mask, but I could easily imagine her expression under it.

Then the massacre began. I couldn't see any of it except for the end result.

In a single stride, Liz closed in on the wolf knight and tore through its thick armor before the phantom could even react.

"When phantoms are wearing armor," she roared, "you've gotta smash 'em! Doesn't mean they're any tougher to get through! Beat 'em from above! Blow their heads off! I don't care how—just kill it! This has gotta be the most fun you've ever had!"

The enormous wolf flew into the wall and disappeared, leaving the mark of its impact behind. In a matter of seconds, one of the threats had been eradicated.

Without another glance to the wall, Liz turned her smiling skull to the wolf king. At this point, she was looking more like a phantom than the wolf.

The boss stood on guard, clearly a master at the sword as Rudolph had described. Even from a distance, I felt that I would be cut in half if I entered its sword space. Rudolph's expression hardened.

But Liz simply stepped closer as though she were on an afternoon stroll. With a burst of energy, the wolf's sword vanished. No scream followed. Rudolph watched in disbelief. If he were to recount what was happening, anyone would laugh it off as a bad joke.

Even in range of immediate death, Liz remained unfazed. The wolf's sword sliced through the air at blinding speed, but it never met its mark. It almost looked as though Liz were dancing with the sword. As a Thief, she didn't have much in the way of defense. She'd be in a grave place if she took even a single hit. Still, the blade continued to miss her.

"Sword? Grab it! Parry it! Dodge it! Whatever! What's your problem?! Why can't you do it?!" she shouted. As if to demonstrate, she pinched the blade midair. The wolf tried to step back, but the sword didn't budge.

On par with the Protean Sword, was it? Liz had fought against the real Protean Sword countless times. That's how the Grieving Souls stepped up their game. The battle before us was already beyond my comprehension, but it was clear that Liz didn't take the wolf to be a threat. It was a good thing they hadn't said anything like that to Liz. She took any insult to her childhood friends very personally.

Liz shouted again as she half-heartedly beat up the wolf that let go of its sword. Bare-knuckled, her punches whipped past the wolf's raised arms, pummeling its armor.

"Just go, whabam! If you dodge it, they won't get you! If you get them, they can't dodge it! Just do it right! Put your life on the line! You get it, don't you? Don't you?! Stop relying on your talent, dumbass! Hurry! Sprint through life! You don't have any time, T! Work a hundred times harder than me! I'm getting farther ahead every day that you sit on your ass!"

What she was trying to say was anyone's guess, but Liz's flurry of insults had finally pushed Tino into becoming a sobbing mess. Poor thing. Whatever Liz's calling was, it certainly wasn't teaching.

Using her boot Relic, Apex Roots, Liz kicked the boss in the gut. “I was on cloud nine, dammit!”

A boom shot through the cave. Rhuda watched in horror as Liz’s leg pierced through the boss’s armor and into its torso. The wolf twitched, howling mournfully into the depths of the cavern as its blood splattered over Liz’s mask.

I should have chosen a different symbol for our party...

“Did you let it all out yet, Liz?” I asked.

“Yeah... A bit.” Her voice was calmer now.

Tino hushed her sobbing as if to prevent anything from spoiling Liz’s mood again. Liz yanked her leg out of the phantom and let the corpse drop to the ground with a wet thud.

Seeing that it didn’t disappear, the phantom must have been alive, but it wouldn’t be for long; that wound was fatal. Already uninterested in the wolf’s fate, Liz skipped back to me, her shoes stained and her skin speckled with blood.

Liz displayed overwhelming strength and unending violent urges. She was a ball of talent but not much more. She lacked something critical to the development of human emotion, yet there stood Liz Smart, the walking genocide of our party that I simply couldn’t believe was integrated into human society.

Rhuda and the others sank to the ground and slumped in a heap. I know, it’s tough to believe. She was our Thief. She acted more like a Brigand.

Liz took off her mask. With a bloody finger in her mouth, she looked at me. There was a hint of shyness in her expression. “Oh, I almost forgot. I’m home, Krai Baby.”

“Welcome home, Liz.”

Liz jumped into my arms, and I drew her into a hug. She was hot, like fire to the touch.

Epilogue: Let This Grieving Soul Retire!

Having donned their brand-new grinning skull masks, they all shared a chuckle.

“Pretty cool. You designed these, Krai Baby?”

“But if we start wearing these, people are gonna be afraid of us...”

“So what? They’ll be afraid of us no matter what.”

Wearing masks like that made all of them look like freaks, regardless of their sex or size.

Once upon a time, six children living in a remote town dreamed of becoming treasure hunters.

The bravest boy of all loved his sword and dreamed of becoming an unparalleled Swordsman.

The most curious girl of all sought the road ahead and dreamed of becoming the quickest Thief.

The kindest boy of all wanted to protect his friends and dreamed of becoming the best Paladin.

The smartest girl of all had the foresight to strive for power and dreamed of becoming the supreme Magus.

The weakest girl of all thought well on what she could do and dreamed of becoming a prodigious Alchemist.

They always had smiles on their faces. As they strove towards their dreams, their gifts and hard work never betrayed them. The grinning skull, as Luke had predicted, grew to become a symbol feared and respected by all.

I, meanwhile...

“Hey, guys? I was wrong.”

In the lounge of First Steps clan house, Gilbert took in his temporary partymates. An entire day had passed since their return from the nightmarish quest in the White Wolf's Den. Gilbert had been told later on (since he'd been unconscious when he'd been carried out of the den) that the hunters they'd rescued had made it safely back to the capital. The quest was complete.

The Association and the empire would be left to deal with the anomaly in the White Wolf's Den. Hunters of higher level would soon be sent to investigate the cause of the changes in the vault.

"I always thought I was strong—that I'd *grown* strong—but I've got a long way to go." He looked to the Purgatorial Sword propped up beside him.

Gilbert had never faced a true challenge. Even when he found himself in a tough situation, he had always made it out on his own merit. He had been confident that, with that, he would eventually become the strongest hunter in the world, but now that he had glimpsed what achieving that dream truly looked like, he understood how far he was from it.

He didn't resent Liz for nearly killing him; in fact, he didn't even remember much about that moment. He had had his guard up the entire time, yet he still had no idea what had happened to him. That, in itself, was a clear indicator of how far behind her he truly was.

In the beginning, Gilbert had started out alone, but he'd grown overconfident as he'd worked with others weaker than him. After leaving them, he had met new, talented allies, faced a phantom they could barely defeat by working together, and finally encountered a real-life freak who could mop the floor with a bunch of those phantoms.

He assumed that Thousand Tricks, as the leader of the Griever, must be far stronger than even Liz. Even after paying close attention to every move of the lead Griever, Gilbert hadn't understood Krai's true capabilities, most likely because there was such a vast divide between where they stood.

The very short time Gilbert Bush had spent on his mission had been enough to change his outlook forever. While the dangerous quest had reaped almost no monetary reward, Gilbert found it to be rewarding in other ways. In just a day or so, he and his partymates had learned so much about each other.

“I couldn’t see just how much was ahead of me. The way I am now, there’s just no way I’ll make it there. I’m gonna apologize to my old party. Train from the ground up. Start over,” Gilbert said.

Tino simply nodded. “I see.”

Hunters grew. They grew through battles, through losses, and through knowing what stood at the peak. So many of them gave up on their dreams. However, even in the face of great failure and hopelessness, Gilbert’s eyes burned with determination. There was nothing else Tino could say.

Gilbert stood, looking as if a fog had lifted. He took one more look at his party members before turning to Tino. “If you don’t mind, thank Thousand Tricks for me. Tell him sorry I caused so much trouble. And... Let’s see... Tell him to watch. I’ll be grabbing bullets in no time.”

“I don’t think so,” Tino replied in a small voice.

Gilbert pointed directly at Tino’s disbelieving face. “Don’t get it twisted,” he declared loudly, garnering the attention of all the Steps members in the lounge. “I haven’t given up on becoming the strongest hunter. I’m just changing how I’m gonna get there, is all! I’ll be there soon enough. And I’ll catch up to you too, party leader. See ya!”

Gilbert was about to leave when Rhuda called after him.

“Oh, Gilbert, you forgot this!” She pointed at the Purgatorial Sword.

Forgetting one’s weapon, one’s lifeline, was unthinkable for a hunter, but Gilbert didn’t turn around. He only shouted back, “I don’t need that anymore. I don’t deserve it yet! That’s a powerful sword, but I can’t get stronger if I keep relying on it! I’m gonna learn to catch a bullet with my bare hand like the Stifled Shadow can!”



“Right...”

“Take it as a gift for Thousand Tricks! No, I’m, uh, just asking for him to hold on to it until I’m strong enough! Just you watch, I’ll be right back here to reclaim it!”

“You haven’t changed at all, kid,” Greg remarked.

Even without its power as a Relic, the Purgatorial Sword was a potent weapon. After using it for most of his hunting career, Gilbert would face a tough road ahead without it. He knew that, of course, but the boy had decided to leave his sword behind nonetheless. This was out of a kind of resolve that only he could understand. No one could ruin that for him.

Tino frowned for a moment and then called after him. “Gilbert.”

“What? Don’t try to stop me.”

“No, I’m not going to stop you, or anything...”

Tino imagined that Gilbert would grow very strong. When their temporary party had been formed, she hadn’t been able to see anything in him, but he had been appointed by her master, after all.

After a deep breath, Tino lowered her shoulders. She wished Gilbert a bright future as she said, “Lizzy’s mask is a special one without eye holes. She was completely blind when she caught the bullets. Maybe you should keep that in mind if you want to do the same as her.”

“What?” was all Gilbert could mutter.

What a day. I was both mentally and physically exhausted. My Safety Rings were my ace in my pocket, my last line of defense. Using over half of them indicated just how close to my demise I’d been.

“Good work, Krai. I hear the Association’s up in an uproar,” Eva said.

“Uh-huh.” I was leaning back into my office chair, rocking to and fro.

The anomaly of the White Wolf’s Den was on a very unusual scale. Somehow, we’d managed to get everyone back alive this time around, but this sort of

disturbance was usually only noticeable after several hunters had lost their lives. If Liz hadn't ran home, leaving everyone behind... If she hadn't jumped into the den despite her exhaustion, ten hunters including yours truly would have perished in there.

I looked at Liz, who was sleeping on the couch, cradling her knees. She was definitely exhausted, seeing as she wasn't even stirring. It would have been an adorable sight had it not been for the eerie mask over her face.

I was the one who'd designed that mask, of course. I was also the one who'd forgotten to punch eye holes in them, but I couldn't be blamed for my party continuing to use them regardless.

My friends were still improving at the same breakneck speed that they had been when we had first arrived at the capital. The difference between them and me was growing by the day, but perhaps that was my fault for not venturing into treasure vaults with them. Still, if I was a hundred times crappier than them now, I wouldn't even begin to get closer to them by simply showing up. That much had been made painfully obvious after getting my lazy behind handed to me in that treasure vault.

We had wanted to be heroes. That had been our goal ever since we had decided to become hunters. I wondered if any of my friends realized they were already heroes to me. Each of them could do a little work on their character—a *lot* of work, in fact—but I couldn't deny that they were somehow managing to survive in human society as they were.

I let out a long sigh. I'd made up my mind. "I'm going to quit treasure hunting," I said.

Eva looked at me as if to say, "*Not again.*" I knew she wouldn't believe me after all the times I'd threatened to quit. This time, though, I meant it.

"I learned my lesson after putting Tino and her party in danger. I'm not strong enough to be on the front lines. I'd been away for so long, I was useless in there."

"I believe Tino chose the words, 'Master is god,'" Eva said.

"I feel bad for what happened to Tino. I don't prescribe that quitting is

accepting responsibility, but I can't go through that again." I laughed. "I'm getting too old for this stuff."

"You're the top young hunter in the city."

"If I keep at the job, I feel like I'm gonna mess up in a way that can't be fixed. That's what I'm afraid of. I have some money—enough to move back to the country and retire."

I didn't need a fortune or any kind of luxuries. All I needed was enough money to allow me to live out my days on my own terms. How wonderful would it be to not have to fear for my life at every turn? I'd be safe at last.

I couldn't take on phantoms again. Just reliving what had happened in the den made me shiver. I'm never playing human missile again either.

Even Little Gilbert and the Great Greg were talented, all things considered. There was no place for me out there anymore. Times had changed. The golden age for treasure hunters gleamed a little too brightly for me to handle.

Eva pushed up her glasses and gave me a dirty look. "Just to be clear, there will never be a peaceful life for you, Krai, unless you change that face of yours or something."

"Way to bring down the mood."

If only Liz hadn't destroyed Reversible Face...

"I think I just need to go far enough away where no one knows me. My face is pretty unremarkable. I could even fake my death to—"

Just then, I was interrupted by a pair of arms wrapping themselves around my chair from behind.

"Hee hee hee. If you quit, I quit too," Liz said cheerily. The chair creaked under the weight of both of us. I looked back at the couch, but sure enough, only the mask was left there.

If I recall correctly, she was fast asleep just a second ago. Is this some sort of astral projection or something?

"No, no, you're dreaming, Liz," I said.

Well, it had been the dream of all the Grievors to reach Level 10: the pinnacle of treasure hunting. I'd given up early in the game, but the others still had a shot at getting to where almost all other hunters couldn't. Liz was only at Level 6, but that was because some of her points had trickled up to me. If it wasn't for me mooching on the party, she would have been Level 7 at least.

Liz was still beaming, rubbing her cheek against mine. I could feel her warmth through my cheek. A hunter full of energy always ran hotter than the average person. The heat I felt was yet another indicator of our difference in strength.



“Yeah, but if you’re quitting, what’s the point?” Liz asked. “There’s no point making it alone. Besides, I’m already the strongest.” She spoke with a sweet cheerfulness, but I knew full well that her dream couldn’t so easily be forgotten.

Treasure hunting was a talent, but that talent wouldn’t shine without hard work. My friends had gone through tribulations harsher than any other hunters our age had.

Still, it sounded as if Liz meant it. If I quit, she wouldn’t hesitate to leave it all behind and retire with me.

Should I quit? I can quit. I shouldn’t quit. I don’t think I’ll quit...probably. Nope, I can’t do it.

“The party will fall apart without you, Liz,” I said.

“No problem. We’ll all quit if you do,” she replied, dropping a bomb on me.

My shoulders quivered. I had nothing to lose, but I couldn’t say the same for my friends. They were famous throughout the empire and were incredibly influential. Some of them officially worked for the government, while others always received offers from nobles and the military.

If all of them were to retire, they’d have hunters sent after them. High-level hunters. Once they found out I was the reason for their retirement, I’d be at the top of their hit list. It was possible—likely, even—that I’d end up dead. There’s no way. I couldn’t do it. Of course, even without my own mortal peril, I couldn’t single-handedly negate all of my friends’ hard work.

I thought for a while, keen to find some way out of it, but my pitiful brain couldn’t think of anything. That’s what years away from hunting did to a hunter’s brain.

“I’ll guess I’ll keep going a little longer,” I said, finally relenting.

“Woo-hoo! Me too!” Liz cheered, her cheek on mine and her legs dangling in the air.

No problem. Just as long as I don’t have to go into any treasure vaults. This was all Gark’s fault for shoving that stupid quest on me in the first place. I vowed then and there to never accept any more quests while Ark wasn’t

around, and turned firmly away from reality.

Interlude: The Prodigy

It was a revolutionary weapon—a life-form distinct from any other that had come before it. It contained in its body a function of great taboo that all scholars only dreamed of creating but, because of the great dangers, ultimately forbade themselves from fulfilling.

Upon its creation, the being felt an insatiable, near unbearable hunger. However, it overcame its instinct using the intelligence it had been given. Trapped in the darkness of a small metallic capsule, the being forced itself to change—to evolve and adapt to its environment.

Over days and days, the being reconstructed its slimy form until it could pass through even the barrier that was a sealed metal capsule. When it did eventually escape, however, the being remained trapped by a secondary barrier of an entirely different matter than the metal lining of the capsule. The barrier was constructed in a way that prevented the being from breaking through it.

So it waited. It understood—with an intelligence far too developed for a magical creature of a liquid body—that one day, the door would open and release with it by far the worst creation the prodigy Alchemist had ever created.

And finally, its time had come.

To be continued...

Side Story: A Day with Tino

“What? Bodyguard?” Tino asked, wide-eyed. She had just been preparing to take on a treasure vault assigned to her by her mentor as part of her training.

Her beloved master was standing before her, smiling a guilty grin. That was Krai Andrey, a hunter with one of the highest levels in the capital. As the sun was high in the sky, there was no one else present in the clan lounge. This wasn’t an usual sight. Hunters mostly worked by day.

Krai was dressed almost too casually for his occupation, without any protective gear. Upon closer inspection, however, Tino’s master carried an absurd number of Relics. It was no secret that practically everything he wore—the chain on his belt, his silver necklace, and the cuff links on his sleeves—was a Relic. Rumor had it, that habit had earned him the moniker of Thousand Tricks.

As Tino watched him blankly, Krai refused to meet her gaze. “Yeah, I just felt like going to the Relic shop today. I was gonna ask Liz or someone else, but I couldn’t find them, so...” He trailed off, laughing rather forcefully.

“I’ll accompany you,” Tino said.

“Right, I know it’s a hassle, but I think you’d learn a thing or two from looking at some Relics. Yeah, you should get one, actually. It’s high time. This’ll be as much good to you as it will for— Wait, really?”

“Yep.”

Krai looked on in surprise as Tino swiftly packed away her reference materials and stood from her seat. As important as it was for Tino to prepare for her life-or-death mission ahead, her master’s request was of much greater importance.

Her only reason for faltering was his choice of word: “bodyguard.” To her, it just didn’t make sense. Tino had received high praise for her skill, but she was still only a Level 4 hunter.

She looked to her master with expertly puppy-dog eyes. “But, master, I’m but a speck of dust compared to you. I doubt I’ll be of any use to you.”

“‘Speck of dust’ must be your favorite phrase, Tino. I’ve heard you use it more times than everyone else combined.”

Tino still wondered how she could be of service as a bodyguard when she was far weaker than the man that she would be guarding. If Krai had asked Tino’s mentor as he had intended, that would have been slightly less far-fetched. Stifled Shadow, a Thief like Tino, far surpassed Tino in both threat detection and combat. What’s more, a bodyguard was hardly necessary within the safety of the capital.

Krai maintained his usual smile. “Oh, it’ll be fine. We probably won’t be attacked, and, you know, just think of it as a date or something.”

“A date?!” Tino stared at Krai. She had idolized her master for years. At least a small part of her devotion was fueled by romantic feelings. The problem was that her mentor adored Krai with all of her heart. Competing for his affection was unthinkable. To Tino, Krai was far beyond her reach. She could count on him to give her attention when she asked for it, but she didn’t dare ask for it too often.

Tino didn’t care that the Relic shop wasn’t exactly the most romantic spot in town, nor that her master dragged whoever he could get his hands on to accompany him on his hobbies. She could even overlook playing second fiddle to her mentor.

Tino evaluated her outfit: a leather jacket that sacrificed fashion for protection, shorts optimized for dexterity, and black combat boots lined with steel soles. The large dagger and the potion bottle on her belt completed her treasure hunter look. She didn’t look bad by any means, but the outfit was very plain for a date. In fact, she was dressed for the battlefield but going on a date was a whole new type of battlefield for Tino. As Liz Smart’s only apprentice, Tino couldn’t afford to embarrass her, but she couldn’t afford to lose to her either.

“I’ll go change,” Tino said with a grave expression. She moved to stand, but Krai caught her arm.

“What?! No, there’s no need to— Hey, Tino...”

“Forgive me, master. I can’t go looking like this! I may never be stylish enough

to be by your side, but this is a matter of a woman's pride!"

"Don't be like that, Tino! I'd feel bad, so let's just go!"

As Tino swung around to escape, Krai heartlessly unleashed his Hounding Chain.

"You're a cruel, cruel man, master," Tino grumbled.

In the end, she hadn't been allowed to change her clothes. With the Hounding Chain keeping her at Krai's every beck and call, there was nothing more Tino could do.

The streets of the capital were bustling as they always did. Tino walked, with an appropriate level of wariness, beside her smiling master. As she did, she wondered if, to passersby, she and Krai looked to be on a date. Probably not. At best, someone might peg them for hunting buddies. If she had only managed to change her clothes, she might have had a shot. A better shot than she had at that moment, anyway. Tino made no effort to disguise how disgruntled she was.

Krai patted her arm. "You don't have to be so grumpy, Tino. Don't worry. You already look very..."

"Very?" Tino repeated, expectantly.

Krai beamed. "Very strong."

"You should learn to treat girls a little better, master."

Strong? Weren't they on a date?

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Here, if we hold hands, it'll look a little more like we're on a date."

Her master laughed heartily and reached for Tino's hand. She decided to accept her master's atonement and forgive him for all of his indiscretions thus far.

"Glad you're so easy to please, Tino. Good girl." He ruffled Tino's hair, making her melt at his touch. It didn't matter to her that she was playing right into his

hand; this felt like a real date, kind of.

“Master, complimenting me like that will only get you ten thousand gild, at most.” That was Tino’s current life savings. Apprenticing had a lot of expenses.

“That won’t even get me a single Relic,” Krai said with a deadpan expression. “You’re useless, Tino.”

“You know I was joking, right, master? Right?”

The pair turned off the bustling main street—a popular romantic destination—taking an alleyway that ran off to the side. Krai took Tino through a maze of tight alleys until they arrived at a Relic shop with a rather subdued exterior.

Tino’s hopes of experiencing a normal date were shattered when she read the sign above the door. This wasn’t the first time her master had dragged her to a Relic shop. In fact, she had accompanied him to this one, Magi’s Tale, on several occasions. Apparently the shop had been standing for over a hundred years and was a hidden gem of the capital.

Tino frowned at the bell depicted on the sign. “Master, am I just an entry ticket to you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m so sad, I’m going to be sick.”

“Uh-huh.”

Tino’s master had completely brushed her out of his mind. She clutched his arm in shock, but he showed no sign of noticing her as they stepped through the door.

The Relic-chilled air cooled Tino’s cheeks. In contrast to the dingy storefront, the interior of the shop was neat. The shelves were filled with numerous Relics were organized by their shape.

Relics were far more precious than most jewels. A fully armed security guard raised a brow as Krai casually sauntered in with Tino clinging to his arm, but he soon regained his stoic expression as he recognized Krai.

Tino knew her master was a regular at this shop, having purchased at least ten Relics here—and those were only the ones Tino knew about. Still, his eyes

shone with excitement at the sight of the merchandise. She suspected he had forgotten they were on a date.

“There’s not much,” he muttered. “I guess I come here too often. Any restocked Safety Rings? Nope.”

“I thought you were out of money, master.”

Relics were a natural resource and only made their way to the shelves of stores like this one by hunters selling them. Hence, the inventory seldom changed.

I would love some ice cream, master. If there’s no new Relics, why don’t you come back another day? The snack will be my treat. Tino never said those words out loud. As much as she was enthusiastic for a date with her master, she had little interest in Relics. Her mentor had warned that it was too early in her training for her to wield one, and she offered most of the Relics she found to him. That was why she was so poor. There was also another reason Tino was so unhappy to be here.

After a quick perusal of the shelves, Krai sighed and went over to the empty counter. Banging his hand on the surface, he shouted, “Hey, Matthis! I brought Tino! Tino’s here!”

A man in his sixties or seventies emerged. He had a full head of white hair and deep wrinkles on his face. Matthis was the shopkeeper of Magi’s Tale—a master of his trade who had been appraising Relics for five decades. His eyes found Krai, making the old man give off quite the bullheaded impression. He clicked his tongue. “You again.”

“Is that how you greet one of your best customers?” Krai retorted.

Tino had found Matthis’s attitude blasphemous at first, but she had come to realize that his manners were par for course. As she stood there stone-faced, her master grabbed her by her shoulders and shoved her up to the counter.

Matthis was a skilled trader with good connections and a wide selection of merchandise, but he didn’t sell to those he disapproved of. Many hunters in the capital avoided Magi’s Tale for that very reason.

Matthis disgruntled expression wavered almost imperceptibly as he noticed

Tino. For whatever reason, he liked her.

“See?” Krai proclaimed loudly. “I brought Tino. Take me to the back, or you’ll never see her again.”

“Master, were you just after my body?” Tino asked, only half-kidding.

“Uh-huh,” her master replied.

This was why Tino hated coming here—being reduced to a ticket to the back.

The back of the store was Matthis’s workshop, piled high with unappraised Relics kept from the public eye. The first time Tino had tagged along, her master had been allowed passage behind the counter. Having found his golden ticket, Krai had begun frequently bringing her along. She wasn’t harmed in any way, and she didn’t dislike the shopkeeper with the death glare. Still, she couldn’t help but feel dejected every time. She obviously wasn’t her master’s bodyguard, let alone his date.

Matthis looked as bitter as ever at the idea of allowing an outsider into the sanctity of his workplace. “There’s nothing back there you’d be interested in.”

“Well, I was really hoping I could show Tino some Relics...”

Even Tino knew that was a lie. Seeing that Matthis was still unconvinced, Krai pushed Tino another step closer to the shopkeeper.

Reluctantly, Tino decided to play the part. Although she felt guilty for Matthis, she couldn’t refuse her master’s command. As a form of meager protest, she maintained expressionless and monotone as she said, “Please... Show me all you’ve got, granddaddy.”

As Matthis choked on air, Krai ruffled Tino’s hair.

The workshop behind the counter was much larger than the store out front, but the space seemed more claustrophobic due to the unorganized piles that dominated the space.

Brilliantly bound but faded books crowded the bookshelves on the walls and overflowed onto stacks scattered around the workshop. Unfamiliar equipment was strewn atop a metal table. Tino suspected it was used for appraising Relics. Countless crates covered the floor, each of them stuffed with Relics she had

never seen before. Mostly likely, they were all scrap.

Relics were echoes of the glorious past, recreated by mana material. They came in all shapes and sizes, and contrary to popular belief, most Relics were completely useless. Scrap Relics didn't have so much as the slightest effect, even if they could be charged with mana.

However, discerning whether a Relic was scrap or not wasn't an easy task for a hunter. Any famous form of a Relic or one that produced a noticeable effect was easily distinguished, but analyzing Relics that lacked those traits required in-depth knowledge of past civilizations.

What at first glance appeared to be a scrap Relic could turn out to be useful upon further inspection. Since a single powerful Relic could buy a mansion, hunters usually retrieved anything that resembled a Relic and had each one appraised. Tino didn't see the appeal in this, but she knew that some hunters made a living exclusively by retrieving unknown Relics. It was a form of gambling, she supposed.

She sat on the chair offered to her and dangled her feet as she watched her master and Matthis deep in discussion. She saw Krai's eyes gleam at the sight of the Relics on a table. He didn't spare a thought for her.

I thought we were on a date, master, Tino wanted to say. She had lowered her expectations from the moment she'd realized they were going to a Relic shop, but being completely left out still hurt. For a moment, she wondered what her mentor would do at a time like this, but she quickly chased the thought out of her mind. If she hoped for too much, she could end up losing everything.

Her master seemed oblivious to her steely glare as he rattled off something Tino didn't understand, identifying the Relics by sight. Soon, he remarked, "Hmm, don't tell me you're getting rusty, Matthis."

"You've got some nerve," Matthis snarled. "I don't control what these idiots bring in!"

Tino couldn't really follow their conversation (she preferred kicking to using a Relic), but she vowed to study her Relic lingo before her master invited her to accompany him again. Of course, this wasn't the first time she'd made this vow,

but it was a difficult one to fulfill in the little time she had between training and treasure vault exploring.

Krai finally finished inspecting the pieces on the table. Evidently, there were no hits. Tino was ecstatic, knowing that they could finally leave. If she asked on the way home, he might take her somewhere that resembled a proper setting for a date. However, the light of the end of the tunnel was quickly extinguished as her master began rattling a crate of scrap Relics.

Tino couldn't hold her tongue any longer. "Um, master..."

"Oh, sorry. Just a little longer, 'kay? Dammit! Nothing but trash. These won't do at all."

"A little longer?!" Tino exclaimed. "How many hours?!"

There were an obscene number of crates on the floor and even more piled high along the walls. There must have been a total of a hundred or so, packed full with obvious scrap. When a Relic wasn't shaped like anything useful, it was most likely a useless piece of junk.

Matthis looked at the frozen Tino. "Hey, don't leave the girl alone. What's she supposed to do?! That's what I get for letting in a Relic junkie."

"Hmm... Uh-huh."

Krai produced something from a crate and tossed it to Tino, who caught it with both hands and timidly observed it. It was a steel-gray ring, clearly cheap and useless. Tino looked as confused as ever.

Matthis cinched his brows. "That Shooting Ring's a piece of trash—worthless junk that fires off magic bullets that deals no damage. And it drains as much mana as the real deal. The bullets aren't even bright enough to create a diversion."

"What did you want me to do with this, master?" Even Tino could tell by listening that it was a useless scrap piece.

Her dear master replied without looking up from a crate. "I'm a bit busy. Why don't you practice using a Shooting Ring with that. Have Matthis teach you."

"What?" Tino cried, nearly jumping to her feet.

Matthis inhaled, ready to raise his voice.

Krai's eyes remained glued on the scrap Relic that looked like a twisted wooden doughnut. "Oh, yeah. If you master that thing, I'll get you a proper one. If I have any money left over. Cool?"

"Y-Yes, I'll master it!" Tino cried, turning to plead to Matthis. "Please teach me!"

"Uh, sure. I've got a target out back. Are you sure about this?"

Matthis looked pityingly at the suddenly enthusiastic Tino, but she didn't mind. As long as she walked out of this with a ring her master bought her on their date, she didn't care what she had to endure.

Tino hadn't expected a surprise like this. She had never used a Shooting Ring before, but she knew it was one of the easiest Relics to handle. That meant failure was not an option. Every sense of dissatisfaction melted away from Tino as her competitive spirit blazed. With a glance to her master, who had resumed his Relic hunting, Tino tightened her fists.

The Shooting Ring proved difficult to handle. Tino just couldn't get a feel for it. She'd known that controlling any Relic was a difficult task, but she hadn't expected it to be this challenging. At first, she couldn't even activate the ring. As she stared confusedly at the ring on her finger, Matthis walked her through the process.

After an hour of grueling trial and error under Matthis's supervision, Tino finally fired a shot. A faint ball of light like a spherical fog materialized at the tip of her forefinger, flew into the ceiling, and dissipated without a sound. Tino stood blinking at the ceiling.

Matthis heartily applauded her. "Good job. It takes talent to master a Relic in an hour, even a simple Shooting Ring like that. Maybe it's a good match for you."

"Thank you," Tino said quietly. She had never activated a Relic before in her life.

Although she had held several Relics of her own, she had never thought to try and use them. Her mentor had told her to wait on it—that she should train her body and mind before training to use a Relic.

“I don’t gel with Relics,” her mentor had said. “It’s just faster to slug ‘em. I can barely get one working. Can’t imagine how he lugs dozens of them around.”

Those words hadn’t clicked with Tino until now. It did seem faster and simpler to kick the enemy in the face than to use anything like this Shooting Ring. The Relic exercised a different part of her, and the Shooting Ring was one of the easier Relics to use. She could easily see how mastering each Relic took so long and why a hunter who wielded several Relics would be so rare. She would lay off using them for a while.

Seeing Tino exhausted from the mere hour of training, Matthis chuckled. “The next step’s aiming with the thing, but it should be easy now you’ve got the bullet going. Most Shooting Rings shoot straight. Wanna take a break?”

“No. I’ll keep going.” Tino didn’t feel particularly inclined to practice any further, but she had an objective to meet. Forcing her exhausted mind to push through, she recalled how her master had used his Shooting Ring and pointed her finger at the target.

Just then, Tino felt her dear master’s eyes on her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She wasn’t nervous. As Matthis had said, hitting a target shouldn’t be difficult.

Tino already had superb dagger-throwing skills, as well as great vision and spatial awareness. Hitting a target so close with a blade or stone should be a piece of cake. While magic bullets were fired by a different mechanism, the spheres flying straight made it even easier to hit the target.

Krai hadn’t specified that Tino only had one shot, but she was eager to prove herself. Concentrating, she opened her eyes. She stretched her arm out towards the target and fired the magic bullet.

The bullet, glowing soft enough to fade into thin air, flew straight into a bull’s-eye.

As Tino sighed in relief, her master congratulated her with applause. “Good

job, Tino. I knew you could do it.”

Those simple words were enough to make Tino’s heart leap, even though she didn’t think she’d worked too hard, all things considered. She held back her smile and coolly said, “It’s all thanks to Matthis.”

Matthis wrinkled his face like he was embarrassed, having walked Tino through the process for the entire hour. “I didn’t do a thing besides teach her the basics. The rest was her hard work.”

Matthis was acting humble, but Tino knew she could have never activated the Shooting Ring on her own. She owed him big time. Perhaps the next time she came, she’d bring a token of her gratitude.

Tino looked excitedly at her master. She’d done it. Not only had she activated the Shooting Ring, but she had also hit the target. Hitting a target even farther away would have been just as easy.

Shooting Rings came in various forms and materials. Some were silver; some were gold; some were colored or bejeweled. Prices varied greatly based on the rings’ abilities. Tino didn’t care about the abilities, though. She hoped that her master would pick her a pretty piece, but she would happily accept anything he picked out for her.

While Tino awaited his next word, Krai turned to Matthis, holding a small leather pouch.

Um, where is my ring, master? she wondered.

“Speaking of, Matthis, I found this in one of the crates,” Krai said.

“Hm? Leave it to you to dig up something like this,” Matthis replied.

Tino could hardly wait to pick out her ring, but she had enough patience to indulge her master’s obsession for now. Everything in the crates was supposed to be scrap, and Matthis had a trusty eye for Relics. She doubted anything in there was up to her master’s standard.

“It’s a defective Magic Bag. I can’t find any way to make use of it.”

Tino’s brow twitched at the mention of the famous Relic type. Magic Bags had the ability to expand space. Simply put, Magic Bags could accommodate a lot

more than they looked like they could. While the feature itself could be replicated with modern magic, many of the Magic Bags found in treasure vaults came with additional features. The Magic Bag was the first Relic to come to mind to many when they thought of an item that traded for astronomical prices, depending on their capacity and quirk. They were rarely found and very useful, making them extremely valuable.

Tino nervously wondered what a defective Magic Bag was like.

Looking sheepish, Matthis finally confessed. “You can only put chocolate in it.”

Excuse me? What?! For a brief moment, she forgot all about her ring.

“It can fit a lot of chocolate and make it pretty much weightless,” Matthis continued, “but the opening’s too small to fit anything significant, and you can’t take everything out at once... Yup, it’s definitely garbage. It’s probably a recreation of a child’s candy bag from a civilization advanced in magic.”

What a heap of junk. The original finder of the bag must have been gravely disappointed. No doubt they’d thought they’d found a Magic Bag but it had turned out to be a candy carrier. It was a curious piece, but Tino doubted that even her master would be interested in it.

Krai, on the other hand, wore a grave expression. “Will it really only fit chocolate?”

“Just chocolate,” Matthis answered.

“No room for cookies or ice cream?”

“Not a chance. With a Relic like this, I took my time checking. Only fits chocolate.” Matthis looked severely disappointed.

What a useless Relic! Tino watched with bated breath, patiently waiting for her reward.

Krai stood groaning, cross-armed. After some time, he nodded and said, “That’s a score.”

No way, master... Tino couldn’t help but lament.

“You’re going to hell one day, Krai,” Matthis said.

“Why?”

What a great score! I didn’t expect such a find from those crates of scrap. This is what Relic shopping is all about!

After enduring Matthis’s signature sass, Tino and I left Magi’s Tale. My bodyguard followed me as gloomily as a ghost.

“Thanks for the loan, Tino. I’ll pay you back soon.”

“It’s okay, master. It’s okay. It’s okay,” Tino muttered.

A Magic Bag was a Magic Bag, after all. I had brought a decent amount of cash, but that still hadn’t covered it. I’d only been a bit short, so I’d borrowed the difference from Tino. Luckily, it had all worked out.

Now that I had spent my money, I planned to head back to the clan house and get to stuffing my new find with heaps of chocolate... Well, it should fit chocolate bars, at least. *That’d be perfect. What a night it’ll be.*

I was so excited, I could have danced all the way home, but Tino’s steps were heavy. She must have been tired from practicing using the Shooting Ring. I’d given her a compliment already, but another couldn’t hurt.

“Great job, Tino. You can use a Shooting Ring any time now.”

“Yes... Even though I don’t have one. I don’t have one...”

“What’s with the doom and gloom? Well, I guess a Shooting Ring wouldn’t do you much good. They’re not that powerful. They’re mostly for hunters lacking in damage output.”

“I... I hate you, master!” Tino cried. With that, she darted off.

I didn’t even have time to call after her. She was gone before I knew what had happened. Tino could run fast. She was a Thief, after all. I was left alone on the street, dumbfounded. Passersby looked at me pityingly now that a girl had run away from me in tears.

I squinted in the direction Tino had run off in, but I had no chance of catching up to her. I couldn’t very well use a Relic, or anything. Tino was usually calm and

collected, so it was shocking to see her like that.

I replayed the day's events in my mind. I thought I'd just brought her along to the Relic shop as my bodyguard like usual. Well, I supposed I had ignored her for too long. We had arrived at the shop during the day, and now the sun was nearly setting. Bumming off of her might not have been the smartest idea either. Maybe I'd relied on her too much because she was always such a good kid. I'd be careful next time, and I'd apologize to her when I saw her again. I'd maybe even make it up to her somehow.

Having promised this to myself, I walked home alone as the sun set over the city.

Later, when Tino was thrown into the White Wolf's Den, her Shooting Ring practice would come in handy, but that's another story...

Afterword

If we haven't already met, it's nice to meet you. If we have, it's great to see you again. This is Tsukikage. Thank you all so much for picking up my humble story.

This all began with a very vague desire to write a fantasy-adventure because I thought a field in *Monster Hunter: World* looked so picturesque. I wanted to write about a traditional hero's journey where the protagonist travels beautiful lands in search of treasure, but I also wanted to write a comedy-cum-slice-of-life about some friends goofing off and having fun. I like misunderstandings and that sort of thing.

Since I didn't have time to write all of those novels, I had a bright idea—I'd mix them all into one.

Just in case anyone's reading the afterword before the actual novel, let me give you the rundown. This is a comic fantasy about a hero's journey. Krai Andrey (the main character) is a young man with a broken dream. Krai started out dreaming of becoming treasure hunters with his five friends, but he soon realized that he wasn't not cut out for the job and hung up his treasure hunting shoes. But although he gave up on the treasure hunting world, the treasure hunting world didn't give up on him. Every one of his friends possess talents worthy of their dream, and they will never leave Krai behind.

This is a comedy about a protagonist who was appointed leader of his party because there was no other job he could do. As he gets dragged around from adventure to adventure, he gains the reputation of being the strangest hunter alive. Holding in his vomit, Krai continues to meet the unrealistic expectations of those around him.

This synopsis may give you the impression that the protagonist will be facing a lot of tribulations, but it's mostly the people around him who pay the price. As weak as he is, Krai has two talents: escapism and groveling. Have you ever seen a main character like this before?

I tried to write a piece that anyone can breeze through laughing: the weakest hunter's bizarre tale of adventure. My sincerest hope is that you have fun reading it.

Now, allow me to wrap this up with a series of thanks. To Chyko, the illustrator, who created such incredible artwork from my nondescript descriptions (like "long hair" and "average breasts"), thank you so much. Tino, Krai, and Liz are my favorites. In fact, all the characters are my favorites. I don't think I can improve on my nondescriptions, though, so please forgive me!

To my editor, Kawaguchi, and to everyone else involved in publishing this work, the only thing going for me is writing these novels, so you really carried through this process. It's all thanks to you that my story came to life as a book. I'll try my best to meet my deadlines.

Most of all, thank you to all of my readers who have been following the story since its online days, and to all those who have just picked up this book.

Tsukikage, July 2018



Greg Zangif

Rhuda Runebeck

Tino Shade

Krai Andrey

Gilbert Bush

"The, um...the Thousand Tricks?"
the Great Greg stammered.

Still attached to my arm, Tino eyed
him idly. "If you know who my master is,
you should kneel before him and
beg for his forgiveness."

Rhuda, meanwhile, was looking
confusedly between us.

I wished Tino would stop trying to
terrorize her new comrades.
I was so ready to barf.

"Wait. 'Master'?
As in clan master?
Of the Steps?"

"Humbly at your service, your
greatness," I said. No title I had or
ever could have would hold a
candle to the Great Greg.



???

"Just go, whabam! If you dodge it, they won't get you! If you get them, they can't dodge it! Just do it right! Put your life on the line! You get it, don't you? Don't you?! Stop relying on your talent, dumbass! Hurry! Sprint T! Work a hundred times harder than me! I'm getting farther ahead every day that you sit on your ass!"

What she was trying to say was anyone's guess, but Liz's flurry of insults had finally pushed Tino into becoming a sobbing mess.

Poor thing.

Bonus Short Story

Thousand Tricks' Resolution

I sighed at my decidedly unfirm upper arm. “Maybe I should work out a little...”

For years, I had abstained from treasure vaults because I hadn't been able to stand my lack of talent compared to the talent of my friends. I thought I'd made peace with how weak I was, but when, in the White Wolf's Den, I'd had to come to terms with just how out of shape I was, I'd felt a kick in the pants strong enough to make me want to improve myself for once.

Treasure hunters maintained their immense power only as long as they continued venturing into treasure vaults. Tragically, mana material rapidly leaked out of hunters when they slacked off. Still, not being able to keep up with Tino—while I was perfectly well and she'd had a bum leg—had been a tough reality check.

And that wasn't all. The rest of Tino's party had consisted of hunters who hadn't exactly been rookies but had been far from being veterans, and yet every single one of them had outhunted me. The ship had long sailed for me to catch up to the other Grievors, but my performance in the den had been flat-out pathetic.

“What's up, Krai Baby?” Liz called from the couch she was lazing on.

“I was just thinking I hadn't trained in a while,” I said.

I had made sure to at least keep from gaining weight, but I hadn't taken up any proper training. No amount of hauling ass was going to keep me alive in the kind of vaults the Grievors were delving into nowadays. Anyone lacking in talent or hard work stood no chance in high-level vaults.

Liz crooked her neck. “What? You're perfect the way you are.”

I grunted. Truth be told, some measly training here and there wouldn't put a

dent in fixing my problem. Of course, I could never train to be as strong as the Great Greg or Li'l Gilbert, nor as fast as Tino or Rhuda, but this was just a matter of pride. Watching Tino and her party had made me feel like a loser.

Liz wrapped herself around my arms. It was hard to believe from the soft peaks pushing up against me that she was far more robust than I was. "Besides, if you get any stronger, what are the rest of us supposed to do?" she asked.

I wasn't sure if she was being cocky or nepotistic. Maybe it was both.

"If you have all that time on your hands, won't you play with me?" she said, nuzzling my arm. I hated to point fingers for my own laziness, but I felt like these interactions contributed to me falling way out of shape.

Tightening my fists, I rose to my feet, Liz still clinging to me. "I'll train myself from scratch," I said.

"That's not really your style."

How bad were my prospects that an elite hunter like her could see how unfit I was for the job? And why, oh, why was I still a hunter, anyway?

"But if you insist, I'll build you a regimen!" she said. Then, with a beaming smile, she began presenting me with training options tailored to high-level hunters. "First, you run as fast as you can—until you collapse! It builds stamina and makes you faster."

"Uh-huh... Wait, what?"

"Then you swing your weapon—until you collapse! That builds strength. You add weights as you get used to it!"

"Um..."

"After that, you spar—until you collapse! You build resistance to pain, and it works you out from top to toe! Efficient, right? That's the basics!"

Apparently the word "moderation" wasn't in Liz's dictionary. How did training "until you collapse" even make any sense? That meant no matter how much I trained, it would never get any easier. And all of that was the basics?

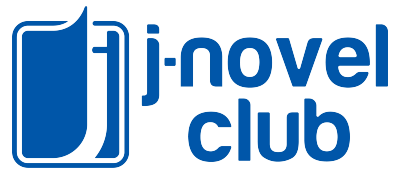
"Won't all that overtraining damage your body?" I asked. Personally, my sanity would crack even faster than my body would. This was insanity.

Palms together, Liz tilted her head. “Of course it will. Don’t you worry—we’ve got plenty of healing potions to pick you up again. I didn’t have much money when I was training, but that’s not a problem anymore.”

The problem was very much intact. I flashed her a smile, matching the size of hers, and said, “I don’t think that’s my style.”

“Right?”

I couldn’t imagine whose style it was to endure such sadistic training. I shuddered as I recalled Tino sprinting with her injured leg.



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Let This Grieving Soul Retire! Woe Is the Weakling Who Leads the Strongest Party Volume 1

by Tsukikage

Translated by Adam Seacord Edited by Stephanie Buck

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